THE RIGHT FEAR AND THE WRONG FEAR.

'IT LOOKS SO!'

GOSSIP.

BY THE AUTHOR OF 'SUNSHINE IN SICKNESS,' &c.

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On a pleasant evening in June, an old man was sitting under one of the fine old elm trees fronting the cricket field at Elmsdale, watching the game carried on by his juvenile neighbours, and exchanging observations with the passers-by, who were arrested by the sight of the cricketers. He seemed well known to all, and replied to their greetings with a hearty manner, and a friendly smile which gave a peculiarly benevolent expression to his face. Although his white hair and somewhat stooping form showed that he had nearly reached the term of years usually allotted to man, time had apparently dealt kindly with him, and care did not sit heavily on his brow; indeed, his neighbours were wont to say that he was as blithe and cheerful as a boy; and so perhaps he was; he had a good conscience and a guileless heart, and sorrow and care could not cloud the sunshine he bore about him.

He was evidently well versed in the intricacies of the game that was going on, and was continually appealed to for his opinion by the spectators, and when any discussion arose about the laws of the game, by the players, who seemed to have constituted him their umpire. When the victory was decided, they congregated about him, and eagerly demanded his approbation of such and such a 'hit,' 'catch,' 'stop,' &c.

For some time the conversation was entirely confined to 'Wasn't that a glorious catch of Jem's?' 'Did ye mark how well Bob stopped that ball, Sergeant?' and similar questions and answers; but at length the subject was changed by the approach of a group of young men who now came into the field, eagerly talking amongst themselves, and drew near to the cricketers.

'Oh, Sergeant,' said one, 'how I wish you had been with us, you've lost such a sight!' 'Yes, indeed,' said another, 'it was glorious; he is a brave man, and no mistake!' 'Quite a hero!' added a third.

'Why, lads, you seem quite beside yourselves!' said the old man, smiling; 'do tell us what you have seen, and who this hero is.'

'Didn't you know 'twas Daysford fair to-*day,* Sergeant? and hadn't you heard that *Blondin was* engaged to show off there?

Why, there were hundreds to see him!' and then followed a description of Blondin's celebrated performances on the tight rope—cooking a mutton-chop, wheeling a man over, &c.; and the young men grew loud in their praises of his boldness and dauntless courage.

Sergeant Dalton remained silent till the hubbub had a little ceased; but when at length condoled with that he had lost the great spectacle of the day, he said gravely, 'You needn't pity me, lads; yonder sight would have given me more pain than pleasure—nay, I don't think I could have borne to see the man risk his life so madly—I had almost said wickedly, but 'tisn't for me to judge about the right and the wrong—all I know is, I should have a sore heart to see any of you youngsters attempt the like.'

'You needn't fear that, Sergeant,' said one or two; 'none of us would have pluck enough to do such things. Why, if he had lost his head for a moment, he would have been dashed to pieces in a second.'

The old man shuddered. 'I don't want to hear any more of such wild doings, Bob; d'ye think his life was given him to sport with in that rash way?'

'Well, he is a bold fellow, any way, Sergeant; you can't deny that.'

'Bold, but not brave, Bob; I can't admire

such as he. The man has strong nerves, and has been brought up to the trade, and practice has made him see little difficulty or danger, where there seems to be a great deal to those who are ignorant. None of us landsmen could climb the mast and furl the sails in the middle of a fierce storm, as the sailors do; I've seen them run up the rigging like cats, when I've been aboard ship in a tempest.'

'Then you don't think there is so much danger as there seems to be in his doings, Sergeant?' asked a quiet youth who was standing behind him.

'Most likely not, Will; yet there's peril enough to make it very doubtful to me whether these are right doings for a Christian man. Anyhow, I say again, I don't admire such, and I think a man might do all these "feats," as they call them, and yet not have true courage.'

'Well,' interrupted Dick Lucas, who had been one of the most eager in his praises of Blondin's performances; 'well, I do admire men like him, who don't know what fear is.'

'You might say that of the sergeant,' cried one of his companions; 'we all know what a brave fellow he has been; he can't know the touch of fear; it never paid him a *visit*, I'll be bound.'

'*I should be* very sorry to say that, lad,'

said the old man; 'I hope I've the right sort of fear, anyhow.'

'The right sort of fear!' cried one rather flippantly; who'd have thought to hear old Sergeant Dalton speak up for fear?'

'Do tell us what it is you mean by the right sort of fear, Sergeant,' said Will.

'Look in your Bible, Will, and you'll find an answer,' replied the old man; 'but we mustn't speak holy words lightly—but be sure, lad, there's a right and a wrong fear: you are fond of riddles, Will, so I'll give you one to think upon.'

'I think I know what you mean, Sergeant —let me see—yes, the right fear is what keeps us back from doing wrong, and the wrong fear is what keeps us back from doing right.'

'Well said, lad—but come, we must be going home; 'tis getting late, and the dew is falling fast. Good night, neighbours;' and rising from his seat, and taking up his stick, the sergeant left the field, escorted to the gate of his cottage by several of his young friends.

Ned Dalton's life had been a very stirring and eventful one. A brave, frank, high-principled boy, he had been well taught at school, and sent into the army as soon as he was of age to bear arms. His regiment had been employed in active service in

various parts of the world, and he had been distinguished for good conduct and courage, had gained some medals, and was now pensioned off, on account of ill health brought on by his sufferings in the trenches before Sebastopol, where so many of his brave comrades had yielded up their lives. There could be no doubt, as his young neighbours had intimated, of his fearless bravery; and he always spoke of courage as one of the first of virtues, but he maintained that there were many circumstances in daily life in which more true courage was shown than in the perilous life of a soldier. Perhaps he found his solitary old age and enforced idleness now, harder to endure as a good soldier and servant of the Cross, than his perilous adventures in active service, where the enthusiasm and excitement of meeting danger led him on. He lived alone in his cottage, but was not without relatives; the young man, Will Dalton, was his cousin's son, and was much attached to him, and spent many of his evenings with him; and his pretty sister Janet was often his guest at Elmsdale. Will always set great store by the sergeant's wisdom and learning; and his companions often laughed at the gentle quiet lad for his hearty admiration of his brave soldier cousin. He was himself so meek and unassuming in manner, and so modest in expressing his

feelings and opinions, that few gave him credit for the manliness and firmness he really possessed. He and his school-fellow, Dick Lucas, were frequently contrasted by their companions, as being so unlike in character and appearance. Will was tall and very slight, with dark eyes and hair, and pale complexion—quiet and gentle, but with a pleasant sunny smile that lit up his whole countenance, when anything kind or droll called it forth. Those who knew him well, averred that there was a fund of quiet fun and appreciation of cleverness in his character, and that he was not wanting in courage or decision when these qualities were called into action. Dick was a hearty bluff fellow, a favourite with everyone, dashing and fearless in word and deed, and with an amount of self-esteem which it was not easy to upset. His school-fellows gave him the name of Dick Dreadnought; but they made a mistake in calling him thus, for there was one thing he did dread, and that was his companions' ridicule.

Both lads were now apprenticed to a chemist in the neighbouring town of Stoneton, and could rarely be spared to visit their friends; but Whitsuntide is always the season for holidays, and they had leave to spend the Sunday and Monday at home.

Tuesday afternoon found them again at

their post, chatting merrily, in the intervals between attending on customers, about home and their respective families. In the evening, Robert Pope, a neighbouring shopman, strolled into the shop.

'Hallo! lads,' he said, 'all alone? Where's the governor? When the cat is away, the mice will play, you know: all fair that. Come and have a hand of cards at the Bull, Lucas; a party of jolly fellows will be there to-night, and we shall have rare fun.—Glad to see you too, Dalton; but I am afraid it is of no use to ask you; you can't both leave the shop, I know.'

'No, indeed,' said Will, 'and I think Lucas had better not go to-night; we've only just come back from our holiday this morning, and Mr. Harris is gone to his sister's this evening; he won't like Lucas to go out without leave, I'm sure.'

'No need to tell him, I should think; there's plenty of time to go to the Bull for an hour or two, and be back before he comes home. Come along, Lucas.'

'No, thank you, not to-night; I'll come some other evening. It won't do to go out again, just as I'm come home.'

'Well, good-night then; you fellows are precious slow; I must be off;' and away he went, leaving a cloud on the bright faces of the lads.

'I wish Pope wouldn't come here with his chaff,' said Dick impatiently. 'I'm no more slow than he is, sharp as he thinks himself; but it would be too bad to be off duty to-night, when the governor has been so kind in taking the work himself, and getting a friend to help him, to let us go home together. Slow, indeed!' he muttered, in a vexed tone.

'Well, what matters it?' said Will good-humouredly. 'Robert Pope's calling you slow does not make you so, you know; and I should not care to be what such an idle fellow as that would call "fast" and "sharp," I think.'

'No, I don't mind, of course, what he calls me; but you don't know how he'll go on to-night at the Bull, Dalton: he'll make up no end of a tale about us, and say we were poor-spirited creatures, afraid to move a step without leave, white slaves, and so on.'

Will laughed. 'Well, well,' he said, 'that's a very small trouble to fret about, Lucas.'

'Yes,' said Dick hesitatingly, 'but one does not like to be supposed to be afraid.'

'Afraid of what?' asked Will. 'If you mean afraid of doing wrong, I freely confess myself a coward in that sense. I *am* afraid of doing wrong; that's the right fear, surely, as the sergeant would say. And I'll tell you

another thing, Lucas, if you won't be affronted; it seems to me that you *are* afraid, and with a very foolish fear too. You're afraid of what those idle fellows will think of you, or rather what they will *say*, for they're quick enough to see that you are in the right, and to respect firmness and steady principle in their hearts, whatever they may pretend to think and say of you.'

''Tis all very well to talk,' said Dick, 'but 'tis not so pleasant to be called a coward, I can tell you; and what's more, I'll let those fellows know I'm not one to be called so.'

'Nay, Lucas, you're going the very way to make them think you are afraid, and afraid of them too. Go your own way, man, without minding what Robert Pope or his friends say; they'll lead you into mischief some day, if you let them govern you so. For my part, I wish Pope would stay at home and mind his own business, instead of coming here, unsettling you. But come, it is growing dark, let us put up the shutters, and go to supper.'

Long after Mr. Harris had returned, and the family were gone to bed, a party of half-tipsy young men went by, with noisy shouts, knocking at the doors, and rousing quiet people from their sleep; and Will said gravely, as Dick started up in bed, exclaiming, 'That's Pope's voice!' 'Ar'n't you glad

you did not go to-night, Lucas? 'Tis dis graceful enough in those fellows, but wha would your father and mother say if the thought you would be a companion of their —you that they brought up so carefully?'

'Well, well, I'm not there—don't preach, muttered Dick, in a tone which showed tha he was ashamed of his friends, and of havin thought of joining them; and Will hope that the annoyance and disgust their con duct had awakened in him would keep hin aloof from them in future.

And for a time it had this effect, an Dick remained quietly at home, or strolle out with Will after the shop was closed But as the days grew shorter, and the shop men were released earlier in the evening Robert Pope lounged in oftener, and tried t regain his influence over Dick; entertainin the lads with stories of successful daring an bold deeds, of smuggling and poaching which he had gleaned from the only book which seemed to have any interest for him and always winding up with some allusion t Dick's courage, which he 'didn't doubt whatever his companions might say.' Thes crafty insinuations made Dick fire up, an ask what he meant by that.

'Oh, nothing,' said Pope; 'nothing bu chaff. James Brooks and Bill Hardy di say you weren't the bold lad they took y

for—up to any lark, and afraid of nobody; but I told them you were up to anything, and some day I'd prove it.' And he added, lowering his voice as Will came from the inner room towards them, 'The dark nights are coming on, and we'll have a shot at the pheasants then. Hush! not a word—you're to be trusted, I know—not a word to Dalton; he's no pluck—not like you, as bold as brass;' and he lounged out of the shop again, leaving Dick in a flutter of contending feelings, wounded vanity, and a longing to show that he was as fearless as the boldest of his comrades, and did not deserve their doubts; striving with his better feelings of respect for Will's high principles, and shrinking from taking part in deeds of which he knew his parents would disapprove, and which his conscience told him were wrong.

This made his manner to Will uncertain and brusque; and when his crafty visitor insinuated that Will governed him, and declared he would not join them because he was afraid of Will's preachments, the foolish fellow grew more and more capricious and irritable, so that Will had hard work sometimes to prevent a quarrel.

Occasionally Dick had permission to spend the evening with Pope and his friends, and he always returned in a perverse idle mood; and as time went on, he withdrew more and

more from Will. And what grieved his good friend still more, he gave up by degrees going to church, and reading good books on the Sunday evenings, and spent his half days of leisure in wandering about with Pope and one or two other idle fellows, and his evenings in poring over wild tales and low novels, from which nothing but evil could be gained.

The bright open face grew clouded and downcast, and the pleasant ready manner gave place to a half-defiant, half-careless demeanour. Mr. Harris noticed the change, and questioned Will as to its cause, saying his customers were not accustomed to be served with such careless indifference, and he did not like the surly answers he received when he reproved his apprentice for inattention. 'He used to be as bright and pleasant a young fellow as one could see in any shop,' continued Mr. Harris, 'and now he is moody and discontented, and scarcely gives me a civil word. Those friends of his do him no good, I think; I won't let him go with them again.'

And when Dick next asked leave to go out for the evening, he was sternly refused, and bidden to stay at home and mind the shop, and not idle his time away with a parcel of good-for-nothing fellows, who'd teach him everything that was bad, and lead

him here and there as they liked. 'Mr. Styles was here this morning,' Mr. Harris added, 'speaking about you, and saying it was a disgrace to me to let my shopman be seen down at the Bull, consorting with all the idle fellows in the place, and advising me to keep a tighter rein over you; and so I will, young Sir, for the future. Stay at home, and mind the shop; I'll have no more going out of evenings.' And he walked off, leaving Dick furious, and Will sad and anxious: the rein had been drawn in too suddenly, and much he feared that the previous careless indulgence had been a bad preparation for the present wholesome restraint; which would have been very useful at first, but which would now be galling to Dick's pride, and would, he feared, only stir him up to rebellion.

His fears were but too well founded. Mr. Harris was summoned to the country by a message from his sister, and the two apprentices were left in charge of the shop all day. At six o'clock Robert Pope and Bill Hardy appeared at the door. 'Come along, Lucas,' they said, 'we shall be late; there's a grand gathering of our fellows to-night. Why, what ails you, lad? you don't mean to break your word to us, and not come, surely? Your governor's off somewhere, I know; I saw him going up the street with his great-

coat and umbrella. What keeps you? Not Will, surely?'

'No, not I,' said Will; 'but Lucas asked leave to go with you to-night, and Mr. Harris said no.'

'Said no, did he? A surly old tyrant, what right has he to domineer over you after shop hours, I should like to know? My governor knows better than to treat me in that way. I do as I please after the shop's shut, and he does not meddle with me so long as I attend to his business, and sell his goods; that's all he cares for.'

'But our business is not like yours, Pope,' observed Will quietly. 'You have no customers in the evening, but Mr. Harris cannot close his shop; if people come for medicine, he must serve them, whatever the time may be.'

'That wouldn't do for me,' said Pope; 'I like my liberty too well to stay in any place where I should be cooped up all the evenings, and part of Sunday too; and I can't think why Lucas stands it. He isn't half so sharp as he should be to put up with it. I know I wouldn't, if I were in his place.'

'Why, what would you do?' said Dick gloomily. 'I am apprenticed to Mr. Harris, and here I must stay till my time's up.'

'I know what I'd do,' said Bill Hardy, who had been listening silently to what was

passing; 'I'd contrive to take my holidays without leave, if I could not get them with leave. Come with us, Lucas; your governor will be none the wiser, if Dalton there won't peach, and he's too good-natured to do that, I'm sure; he wouldn't be such a sneak.'

'I don't think it is good-natured to let him go,' said Will, 'for he'll get into great disgrace with Mr. Harris if he finds out that he is gone to the Bull to-night, and somebody is sure to tell him of it.'

'You, of course,' sneered Robert.

'No, I shouldn't tell, unless he asked me the question, and then of course I should tell the truth. But Mr. Styles told him this morning about Lucas' going to the Bull, and he was very angry, and said he should not go there again.'

'What has old Styles to do with Lucas, I should like to know? A canting old muff that's as sour as vinegar, and can't bear anyone to have a lark, because he can't enjoy it himself. Let him mind his own business. You ar'n't afraid of him surely, Lucas? Come along.'

'No, of course not; but I think I'd better not go to-night, Pope. Mr. Harris is likely enough to ask if I've been out this evening; I'd better not go. Next week, perhaps, *when he goes* up to London, I shall have a *chance.*'

'Very well, it's a bargain, mind,' said Bill Hardy eagerly; 'and I'll put you up to a thing or two.—But come on now, Bob; it's no use waiting for him. I dare say he's right; better be on the safe side,' he added sneeringly, as they walked off, Bill saying something in a low tone, which his companion received with a contemptuous laugh, which excited Dick's indignation, as he could not but think that something had been said in depreciation of his courage.

The following week Mr. Harris went to London, to take leave of an old friend who was about to emigrate—and a party of idle young men came to the shop to entreat Dick to join them. Will was gone out on an errand, and they had him to themselves, and plied him with entreaties and threats, with sneering comments on his poor spiritedness and fear of blame, till they worked upon him sufficiently to induce him to promise to join their party as soon as Will was gone to bed; when he could steal off without being found out, as now that his master was absent, Will slept in the front room, so as to hear the night-bell if any medicines were wanted in the night.

'Put a drop or two of sleeping stuff into his beer to-night, Lucas,' suggested Bill Hardy, 'if he's likely to lie awake and spoil sport.'

'Oh! he's too slow a fellow to find anything out,' said Robert Pope; 'and besides, if he did, who cares for him? or old Harris either?'

Will returned soon after the tempters had left Dick, and was surprised to find him morose and out of temper; he answered his cheerful observations sullenly, and scarcely looked up from his book when the chief business of the day was over. He refused to join Will at supper, but swallowed his beer hastily, and complaining of being tired and out of sorts, went off to his room, and as Will supposed, to his bed; while he went round the house to see that all was safe, and put out the lights, as he was accustomed to do when his master was from home.

While he was sleeping the sound sleep of healthful innocence, Dick lay down on his bed in his clothes, watching for the low whistle which was to summon him to join some late goers to the scene of revelry.

The evening was spent in jollity and reckless merriment. Cards were produced after the supper was over, during which beer and spirits were plentifully supplied to the guests, and Dick was soon in the full flow of spirits and excitement, talking, laughing, boasting of his success in eluding Will's observation; while his companions praised his spirit and determination, and urged him to join them

in an expedition to the woods some dark night in December. As the game went on, Dick grew more and more excited; his success at first whetted his desire for gain, but presently his luck changed, and he lost all that he had won, played more and more recklessly, and finally rose from the table owing more shillings than he knew how to pay.

Robert Pope and Bill Hardy escorted him home at three o'clock in the morning; and on the way, finding him out of heart about his losses, and in a mood to venture upon anything rash or desperate, they urged him again to join them, declaring that it would be the best fun in the world to outwit the keepers, and secure a good bag full of pheasants to send off to the London fishmonger, who purchased game at a low rate of Bill Hardy and his companions, without asking any troublesome questions as to their right to dispose of it.

Dick hung back at first: but the hope of getting money to pay his debts, and to try his fortune at cards again, added to the prospect of 'a jolly lark,' as his friends called it, made him less and less reluctant to join the expedition; and when they parted at Mr. Harris' door, it was with a promise to meet on the following Sunday, when Dick would be 'off duty' for half the day, to

arrange for the dark night's work in prospect.

When the Sunday came, however, Will was too ill to leave his bed, and Dick could not go out all day. Will's recovery was tedious; and his master sent him home about the middle of January, thinking that a complete change would set him up. During his absence, Dick was persuaded twice to join the party at the Bull, after his master was gone to bed: and he escaped detection each time, and became consequently more hardened in deception. The night before Will was to return to Stoneton (Sunday night) was fixed upon for the poaching expedition, which had been delayed by his illness, and Dick's detention in the shop.

Elms Coppice was about a mile from Elmsdale, and three miles from Stoneton. As Will was walking home from church in the twilight, he heard the head keeper, who was walking just in front of him, say to one of his assistants, 'Meet me to-night at the west gate of the Coppice, Jem; I have certain information that Bill Hardy and his gang will be popping at the pheasants to-night, and we must try and secure them.'

'How many d'ye think there are of those fellows, Mr. Smithers?'

'*Oh, three* or four. One is a very young *hand though; he has* never been out before;

some chemist's shopman, I think, that Bill Hardy has laid hold of. Another young fellow gave me the information: he was promised a share in the sport, and Bill threw him over, or cheated him at cards, or behaved unfairly to him in some way: and the lad vowed to be revenged; and so he told me that if I were up at the west gate by twelve o'clock or so, I should find some birds of a different feather from pheasants, maybe. I'm just going round by the south lodge now, to tell George and Sam to be ready; and do you give James a hint of what we're after. We had better muster pretty strong—though I don't expect the fellows will show fight—and carry them off to jail if we can.'

'Well, Sir, I hope we shall be able to catch Bill Hardy; he's at the head of all the mischief done in the woods.'

'Yes, and elsewhere too, I'm afraid, Jem. Many's the young man he has ruined, body and soul, tempting him to evil, as one may say. But here's my road, Jem; go your ways home, and mind and be ready to start at eleven o'clock; and don't say a word to anybody—except James, of course.'

Scarcely a word of this conversation escaped Will; he was filled with horror at the mention of Bill Hardy's wicked schemes, as he had thought of him only as an idle gay man, who liked mirth and good fellowship,

and was headstrong and reckless in the pursuit of fun and jollity; and had no idea of the lawless and desperate pursuits into which he was leading his foolish companion, Dick Lucas. The mention of the chemist's shopman alarmed him greatly; and he turned over in his mind all kinds of schemes for warning him of his danger, and detaching him from his companions. It was impossible to communicate with him in time to prevent his joining them, so that Will could only determine to go to the coppice a little while before the time of meeting, and to try to get within speech of Dick, and persuade him to make his escape at once.

Will was not naturally courageous, and his illness had weakened his nerves to some extent, so that he thoroughly disliked and dreaded this nocturnal expedition. But there seemed no other hope of saving Dick; and when he pictured him carried before the magistrates as a poacher, and imagined the despair of his fond father and mother, he felt brave enough to go through with it; and strengthening his courage by hearty prayers for help and protection, he stole quietly out of the house as soon as his family were asleep, and was standing at the west gate soon after eleven o'clock, in the stillness of a winter night, undisturbed by any sound of evil. After waiting there nearly an hour, he

heard voices on the south side of the coppice, and presently after, steps in the direction from which he had come from the village.

Here, therefore, were the keepers on the look out; and the poachers hard at work in the woods, unconscious of the watchers, who were awaiting them. Will could not hope to reach them without being discovered by the keepers, and could only lie in wait silently for an opportunity of detaching Dick from his companions. Growing bolder with the excitement of their sport, and their supposed security, the poachers advanced into the thickest part of the covert, and had already knocked down several pheasants, when the keepers advanced in a body, and called upon them to give up their game: and Mr. Smithers added, 'You'd better put down your guns, and give yourselves up quietly, my lads. We know you all, and you can't escape. Here, Jem, secure Bill Hardy at once.'

'Not so fast, Master Smithers,' said Bill; 'I'm not to be taken so easy, I warn you; keep back, or I'll fire.'

A desperate struggle ensued; and three of the men, including their leader, were overpowered and secured at last; but not till Smithers had received several blows from the butt end of Hardy's gun. Happily, he

had no time to re-load it before he was seized.

Dick was rushing up with a stick to join in the affray, when Will, who had advanced close to the combatants, seized his arm, and holding him back, whispered, 'Come with me instantly, Dick; you're lost if you're seen here. This way—quietly now—run out by the south gate, and get home as fast as you can.'

Bewildered by this sudden recognition, and panic-struck by his companions' capture, Dick ran off; and Will made the best of his way home, but not without being seen for a moment as he ran across the park. The keepers, however, were too intent upon securing their prisoners to attempt to follow him.

Meantime, Dick's terror gave wings to his speed; and he contrived to get to Stoneton, and to be safe in bed, before two o'clock in the morning. Before day he was up, trying to remove the tokens of his night's work, and washing the stains from his coat and trousers, which they had received from the pheasant he was carrying when the keepers surprised the gang. Too well he knew, however, that his fate was at the mercy of his companions; he was completely in their power—and in Will's too. 'How came he to be there?' he wondered; 'and how came

he to recognize me?' and again and again he pondered over all that had passed, and imagined himself taken up, and committed to prison, as one of the gang of poachers: and every sudden call or sharp ring at the bell filled him with fresh terror.

His master remarked his haggard looks the next day, and said good-humouredly, 'We shall have Dalton back to-day, Lucas, to cheer us up. I suppose you've had a dull time of it without him. However, you shall have a holiday soon; and I dare say a breath of Elmsdale air will do you as much good as it seems to have done him.'

Will did not appear, however; but his father came to say that he had caught a fresh cold, and was hardly fit to be up, and to ask leave for him to remain at home a few days longer.

'Why, what has he been about to catch cold again?' said Mr. Harris in a vexed tone.

'I can't say, Sir, I'm sure,' said the father. 'His mother has been very careful of him; and he seemed pure and well yesterday; I suppose he caught cold going to church in the evening; I don't know what else it could be. But he seemed all trembling and shivering this morning; and his head was so bad he could hardly hold it up; so I came straight off here to tell you about

him, Sir, and ask if you could spare him a bit longer.'

'Yes, yes; but tell him to make haste and get well; I want him back as soon as he is fit to come; and Dick Lucas here is quite dull without him, tell him.'

In the course of the day, the news came that Bill Hardy and his comrades had been taken in the Squire's woods, and had up before the magistrates, and that they had committed them all to prison, to await their trial at the next assizes.

Dick turned almost sick with fright; and especially when his master turned to him, noticed his pale face and trembling hands, and said, 'You see, Lucas, how right I was to forbid your consorting with Robert Pope and Bill Hardy; see what they'd have led you to, if you had been hand and glove with them.'

Dick could hardly answer; and his master, thinking him shocked by the sudden news of the fate of his former friends, kindly sent him out for a walk, and took no further notice of his looks.

Before the end of the week, Will returned to Stoneton, looking very pale, and much depressed in spirits; and it soon came out through Mr. Styles, that suspicions were afloat about him at Elmsdale. Dick went home for his promised holiday, and there heard whispers which gave him both pain

and fear. The keepers had spoken of a young hand in the gang, who had escaped during the fray; and one of them had muttered something about 'knowing who it was, and being able to pounce upon him at any time;' and though everything that was said seemed to point to Will rather than to himself, his sense of guilt filled him with terror, and he was not so lost to all honourable feeling, as not to be grievously distressed by Will's incurring suspicion on his account. His father and mother mentioned the reports to him; and he grew red, and blustered, and said, 'Nonsense; who'd suppose such a thing as that of Will—a milksop like him! he wouldn't have the pluck to do anything of that sort.'

The sergeant overheard some of this talk, and turning round, he looked steadily at Dick, and observed: 'The lad's no milksop, whatever you may say, Dick; he's bold enough and brave enough to do what's right; but he's not the lad to break the laws, and go out with fellows like Pope and Bill Hardy. I can answer for it, Will had nothing to do with the poaching affair.'

'Well, I hope not, I'm sure,' said Mrs. Lucas; 'but they do say, Sergeant, that Jem Tanner caught sight of a young lad running across the park in the moonlight; and 'twas uncommon like Will's figure; and

what could he be doing there at that time of night? and they say certain sure 'twas a young shopman from Stoneton as was one of the gang.'

'There are other young shopmen at Stoneton besides Will,' said the sergeant, looking steadily at Dick, whose cheeks grew red and white by turns with terror. And he walked away, saying to himself, 'I can see through that business, I fancy; if that young Lucas does not know something of the matter, I am very much mistaken. But, my poor boy, what can I do for him! this may go hard with him, if as I suspect, he has been meddling with the matter to save his friend: a name is soon tarnished when there's evil reports abroad; but what can I do? I must bide my time, and see how matters go on; but I'll keep my eye on Dick Lucas, and get the truth out of him, if Will is wrongfully accused.'

Poor Will had a hard time of it in the shop; and it was worse still when he went home. Mr. Styles had given Mr. Harris notice of the rumours affecting Will's character; and although his experience of Will made him pretty confident that they were unfounded, he was annoyed at the gossip amongst his neighbours about his apprentice, and resolved that if the matter were not cleared up before Will's time was

up, he would not take him on as assistant, as he had promised both him and Dick Lucas that he would do. He spoke to Will upon the subject, and received from him a positive assurance of his innocence; but when he urged him to prove it, he answered calmly that he could not do so, and that he must submit to the imputations, as he had only his own word for his guarantee; adding, 'You know, Sir, I would not tell a lie on any account. You know too, that I never went to any of the parties at the Bull; and never had anything to say to Bill Hardy and his friends beyond "Good day," and "A fine morning," when he came into the shop. And when I assure you that I had nothing whatever to do with him or his companions, and that I did not join the poaching party, I do hope you'll believe me, Mr. Harris.'

Mr. Harris did believe him; he had always found him scrupulously truthful and steady; but he felt uneasy, and was not brave enough to disregard the remarks of his neighbours. He went to Elmsdale, and questioned Mr. Smithers and Jem Tanner, but could make nothing out from either. Mr. Smithers had been too much knocked about, and too severely hurt by Bill Hardy, to be able to speak positively as to the number of poachers present; and Jem Tanner, who had very little doubt in his own mind as to Will's

identity with the figure he had caught sight of running across the park, was a good-hearted fellow, and would not ruin his prospects by declaring his convictions.

'It would not be fair to say who it was, Mr. Harris,' he said, 'unless I was quite sure; 'twas only for a moment, when the moon came out from behind a cloud, that I saw the fellow, and I can't say for certain 'twas your lad, or who 'twas. All I know is, that whoever it was has had a narrow escape; and may be 'twill be a lesson to him to keep clear of bad company. You'd better leave the matter alone, Sir, and ask no more questions. Bill Hardy is pretty sure to be sent over the seas; and the others will be kept out of mischief for one while, no doubt; the evidence is pretty clear against them, so there is no likelihood of their getting hold of the lad; better leave him alone, and let the tale die away, and give him a chance to keep his good name.'

Mr. Harris went home dissatisfied, and showed his vexation by sharp words, which Will found it hard to bear. His position was not pleasant, for Dick's shame and fear kept him ill at ease with Will, and he avoided speaking to him alone, and shunned his companionship as much as he could; and Will could not but feel it trying that he should show him no thankfulness, and should

not attempt to clear him from the insinuations which he could have disproved at once. 'However,' he reflected, 'to be sure Dick is in a difficulty. If he did speak, he would have to acknowledge that he was with the poachers, and he can't deny all knowledge of their concerns, as I can, with a safe conscience; and then perhaps he'd be taken before the magistrates, and the disgrace would grieve his mother sorely, and Esther too; and Esther's mother, maybe, would forbid her to have anything more to say to Dick. It would be very hard for him to speak, I must confess, but I wish he would not be so surly and disagreeable; if he'd be kind and friendly as he used to be, I should not so much mind bearing this for him. But I dare say he's very unhappy; indeed, I'm sure he is, and that's what makes him so rough and queer in his manner. I must try and be patient, and perhaps by-and-by he'll come round, and tell me what he feels. Anyhow, he can't well speak, I suppose, till after the assizes.'

Unhappy indeed Dick was, ashamed of himself and his cowardice, longing to speak and get the burthen of shame and fear from his shoulders, and yet shrinking from the confession, and feeling it every day more and more difficult.

So time went on; the assizes took place,

and the prisoners were tried, and convicted of poaching and of assaulting the keepers in the performance of their duties. Bill Hardy, as the ringleader, and the most violent in his ill-usage of Mr. Smithers, was condemned to four years penal servitude; and the other two, Robert Pope and Isaac Durden, were sentenced each to a year's imprisonment with hard labour. In the course of the trial it came out that a young man had been seen running across the park, who was supposed to have been of the poacher's party; but Jem Tanner declined to say anything positively about him, and no more notice was taken of the circumstance; and respectable people in the neighbourhood congratulated themselves upon the breaking up of the gang, and the squires hoped that their pheasants might roost in peace for the remainder of the season.

Will's and Dick's term of apprenticeship was now drawing to a close, and both lads hoped to continue in the shop as assistants to Mr. Harris, and to receive pay for their services. He could not, however, make up his mind to keep Will, while the cloud of suspicion hung over him. Though a kind man, he was a weak one, and set great store by the world's opinion; and though he entirely believed in Will's innocence, he had not resolution enough to resist Mr. Styles's

sneers, or the laugh at his poaching shopman, which now and then met his ears. So he sent for Will, and told him that he could not keep him on unless he could prove his innocence publicly, but that he would do his best to procure him another situation; and he proposed to write to a friend of his who was just established as chemist and druggist in London, to ask him to take him as shopman.

Will was sorely grieved at this announcement. The quiet sensitive lad was much wounded by his master's distrust, or what seemed to be distrust, of him; and he clung to his old friends and relations at home, and had no desire to go into new scenes and amongst strange companions. His pride, too, rather revolted at the idea of being obliged to one who would not trust him entirely, for a recommendation. But he struggled against these feelings, and asked permission to go home on the following Saturday, to consult his friends before he accepted the situation, which Mr. Harris made no doubt of being able to secure for him.

When Dick heard that Will was to leave Mr. Harris, another hard struggle took place between his guilty fears and his better feelings; he could not endure that Will should suffer for his fault, and yet he dared

not confess that he was screening him. How he longed to have spoken out at first, and how he felt as if it were impossible to speak now, and to show that he had been hiding the truth, and letting another bear the blame that should have been his all this time! 'They will say I was such a coward,' he thought, 'and I can't stand that—anything but that. Bold Dick Dreadnought, as they used to call me at school, to be stamped a coward now! Oh no, I could not bear that; I should run away. And Esther! I could never look sweet pretty Esther in the face again. No, I can't speak now, it's too late,' he sighed; 'the time's gone by for good now: and yet, poor Will, 'tis too hard upon him. I could punch that Styles's head; 'tis his doing, I'm sure, coming here with his sneers and his whispers. Mr. Harris does not want to send Will away himself, I know, only he's a bit of a coward, and afraid of what people will say. I'll try and get a chance to beg him to keep Will, if I can, and tell him I'm sure he had nothing to do with the business; I dare not say more than that, for fear he should guess something.'

Dick's entreaties were of no avail. Mr. Harris told him to mind his own business, and asked how he came to be so sure of Will's innocence, when he was fast asleep at

Stoneton at the time that Will was suspected of being in the park—a question which effectually silenced Dick; and with a heavy heart he saw Will depart on the Saturday on his visit to his parents.

His father was very desirous that he should accept the situation offered to him, thinking that he would be more likely to get on there than in a country town; so he persuaded his wife, who was very loth to let Will go so far away from home, to agree to his going. He did not trouble himself much as to Mr. Harris' motives in sending him away, but was satisfied with his promise to recommend him; and Will was unwilling to grieve him or his mother, by telling them how much he had been suffering from the reports afloat.

He walked home from Church in the evening with Sergeant Dalton, and he and his sister remained to drink tea with their soldier cousin; and while Janet was putting away the tea-things, the sergeant invited Will to stroll with him to the cricket field, his favourite resort to smoke his pipe; and as he took his usual seat under the elm trees, he said, 'Now, my lad, let me hear the rights of this affair—how comes Mr. Harris to wish to part with you?'

Will answered honestly that Mr. Harris had heard some idle tales about him, and

although he did not believe them, he did not like to keep a shopman about whom such things were said.

'Does Dick Lucas know you are going?'

'Yes.'

'Then why doesn't he speak, and clear you?'

'Speak and clear me! Oh, Sergeant, what do you know about it?' exclaimed Will eagerly, the colour mounting into his cheek as he spoke.

'I don't know anything, my boy, but I've a very shrewd guess that Dick could clear you with a word; and clear you he shall, too, before many hours have passed over his head,' he added vehemently.

'Stay, Sergeant, stay,' said Will; 'if you know all or guess all, you must not betray me.'

'Betray *you*—no, lad; but as to betraying Dick, the sneaking fellow, I sha'n't scruple much about that.'

'Well, but you must really let the matter alone, Sergeant. Now just see how much worse it will be for Dick if it comes out now, than it would have been at first; and if I'd meant to tell of him, I ought to have done it then, and not now, when perhaps it will ruin all his prospects. You know, Esther Bateman, Mr. Harris' niece, is very partial to Dick, and so is her mother; and very

likely they will marry some day, when Dick has got up in the world a little; and Mr. Harris will be sure to help him, and perhaps leave his business to him at last; and if all this were to come out, and Mr. Harris and Mrs. Bateman were to find out about Dick's former conduct, (for he is steady enough now, indeed he is, Sergeant,) they'd turn him off, and tell Esther to have nothing more to say to him, and that would break his heart, and hers too, perhaps, poor thing, for she is a sweet gentle creature, and could not stand a very rough blast.'

'Serve him right if she did break off with him,' said the sergeant angrily; 'a cowardly fellow, that won't speak a word to save his friend from the blame that he deserves himself—I have no patience with him.'

'Well, but think of Esther, Sergeant, that nice good Esther; you would not give her such a stab, surely! No, you must let things stay as they are.'

'And let you be the victim,' said the sergeant mournfully. 'I don't know how I can do that. I suspect you've had enough to bear already, if the truth were known.'

'Perhaps I have,' said Will, with a faltering voice, 'but I can bear it still; the worst is over now, and none of those I most respect really believe me guilty, though they can't contradict what has been said. I ought not

to mind being unjustly suspected; many people fifty times better than me have been wronged before; and sometimes,' he added, in a low thoughtful tone, 'I have felt as if there were a blessing in bearing wrongful accusations—you know why, I'm sure. I can't put it into good words, but it seems as if one ought to be glad to bear part of the Cross that was laid upon the Holiest of the the Holy for us.'

'I see, I understand, Will my lad; and I've no right to meddle with what is laid upon you. Well, then, we'll let Dick alone; but what are you to do when you leave Mr. Harris?'

Will told him of his master's desire to help him, and of his proposal to obtain the situation in London for him.

'There's something you don't like, Will, in the matter. What is it? Don't you like the idea of the place?'

'As well as I should like any place so far away, and amongst strangers,' said Will; 'it is not that, but I don't much fancy being obliged to Mr. Harris for the recommendation, since he won't stand by me altogether, and is afraid to say what he thinks.'

'Has he any doubts of your innocence, think you?'

'Oh no, I don't think that for a moment; *he knows me* too well to believe that I had

anything to do with the poaching affair, but he is afraid of Mr. Styles, and of what he and his friends will say, if he keeps me on after my time is up. He told me plainly it was disagreeable to have a shopman about whom there had been suspicious things said, and that as I couldn't or wouldn't clear myself to his friends and customers, he would rather not keep me. And I don't know that I blame him exactly. There's another chemist's shop started in the next street, and the people will try all they can to get some of the business away from Mr. Harris, and the story might help them to hurt our shop, perhaps; and he is a timid man, and dreads gossip. I don't blame him, but I should respect him more if he would act upon what he believes, instead of caring so much about what people will say; and so it is not so pleasant to be obliged to him, as it would be if he were a firmer friend. But perhaps I ought not to think of that, especially as my father and mother wish me to take the situation; and I know that I do deserve Mr. Harris' recommendation, so I ought not to mind taking it.'

'No, I think you ought not to let that feeling stand in your way, Will; so, as your father and mother approve, you had better decide upon accepting it. Well, God bless you, lad, wherever you go; you've a good

honest heart, and a brave one too, to bear what is before you; and a good conscience is the foundation of all courage, you may be sure of that; and while you have that, you need not fear what others may think or say of you.' So saying, he wrung Will's hand warmly; and shaking the ashes from his pipe, he led the way back to his cottage, where Janet was waiting for her brother to escort her home.

A fortnight after found Will settled at Mr. Benson's, where Mr. Harris' warm recommendation (all the warmer because it was a sort of salve to his conscience, which could not but reproach him with weakness in parting with Will) had secured him a good berth, and the prospect of being high in Mr. Benson's good graces. Trials, however, followed him here; old acquaintances of his master and of Mr. Harris, who had been staying in the neighbourhood at the time of the poaching affray, came to visit Mr. Benson, when Will had been some months with him, and on recognizing his assistant, asked him how he came to take 'Harris' poaching apprentice,' and mentioned the suspicions attached to Will.

Mr. Benson was very much astonished at the tale, and said at once that he felt sure of his assistant's integrity, and that there must be some mistake, which time would probably

clear up. He told Will he had been made aware of the reports, but assured him that they could never weigh with him against the evidences of trustworthiness, which he had given him, since he had been in his service; adding, 'I ask only whether you had anything to do with the affair, Dalton; your word is sufficient.'

'Thank you, Sir; I had nothing to do with the poaching or the poachers,' said Will, 'but that is all I can tell you; I could not prove my innocence, so I was obliged to submit to being accused wrongfully.'

'You *could not* prove it?'

'I could not without injuring a friend,' said Will, colouring; 'and please don't ask me anything more.'

'Very well, Dalton, I trust you thoroughly; only remember, that if I can help you at any time to clear up the doubts that still exist in the neighbourhood, I shall be very glad to do so, and will spare neither trouble or expense to get you righted.'

'Thank you, Sir, thank you; but I am afraid there is little chance of that now,' Will said mournfully; and he went away with a sad heart, feeling how difficult it was to clear a good name when it once got a spot upon it. He had hoped that the tale had died away, and could not but be pained at this revival of it; but his master's entire

confidence in him soon calmed and cheered him.

We must return to Dick, who continued in Mr. Harris' employment, apparently prospering, and with no cares or trials to account for the cloud which was yet almost always to be seen on his brow. Even the society of his intended wife, dearly as he loved her, seemed sometimes to have no power to cheer or rouse him from the moody thoughts which oppressed him. Esther was often perplexed and troubled by his depression, and tried with many a loving wile to draw from him the cause of his gloom. The business was flourishing, and her uncle's confidence in Dick seemed to increase, and he approved of his attachment to her, which was also sanctioned by her mother, so that there appeared to be no cause for the deep sigh and restless movement, with which he occasionally roused himself from the fit of silent thought, which fell upon him when he was not occupied in the shop.

Esther was greatly disturbed by his refusal to go with her to Church on the Christmas morning after they were engaged. She had hoped that he would have knelt with her and her mother to receive the Holy Communion, but he made some excuse for not accompanying her to the Morning Service; and when she lamented over his absence

from the Christmas Feast, he said hurriedly, 'Don't ask me, Esther; I *could not* go, I am not fit,' and seemed so entirely overset and wretched, that all Esther's fond confidence in her lover's goodness could not shield her from the sudden suspicion, that some hidden sin kept him back from the Lord's Table, and was poisoning his peace of mind.

Even her mother observed Dick's moodiness, and asked her if Dick could have got into any trouble with his master. 'He seems so steady, that I should not think it likely; but your uncle told me that he was rather wild and careless as a lad,' she said, 'and his daring sometimes got him into scrapes. But there's one thing that surprises me about him, Esther, and that is, that he seems so odd and awkward whenever the Daltons are mentioned. Now the Sergeant is a very old friend of his parents, and Will was at school as well as here with him, and one would think he would be glad to meet him; and yet when your uncle talked about giving him a holiday the other day, and proposed that he should inquire when Will was likely to be spared from Mr. Benson's, thinking they would like to spend their holiday together at their old home, Dick grew quite red, and stammered something about its being impossible to guess when Mr. Benson

could spare Will, and so it was not worth while to consider that.

'Indeed, Mother, I don't understand that at all,' said Esther; 'Dick was always so fond of Will Dalton; and when those stories were afloat about him, don't you remember how angry he used to be, Mother, and how he used to get quite into a rage about it, and declare that he was sure it was all nonsense, Will had nothing to do with poachers or any work of the sort?'

'Yes, so he did, to be sure, child; and yet it's very strange that he never speaks of him or writes to him, and looks so queer when his name is mentioned.'

Esther pondered much over her mother's observations, and began to connect Dick's hidden trouble, whatever it was, with Will's name. Sergeant Dalton came to the house occasionally, and if Dick chanced to be there when he came in, she noticed that he changed colour, and seemed to seek for some excuse for going away; and when Will was spoken of, although he listened eagerly for tidings of him, he never asked a question about his former friend.

One evening, when the sergeant had been drinking tea with her mother and herself, she took the opportunity of her mother's absence from the room, when she was called away by the servant girl, to make inquiries

about Will, and she led the sergeant on to talk about him, and to tell anecdotes of his young cousin's boyhood, &c.

'He was rather a timid lad, was he not, Sergeant?' she asked. 'Not so brave as Dick, I mean.'

'Yes, indeed, quite as brave as Dick,' said the sergeant vehemently; 'he'd more *true* courage by half—but not naturally, perhaps,' he added, cooling down. 'He was a delicate sensitive boy, and his nerves were not very strong; but he'd the right sort of courage, and the right sort of fear too, and that's more than can be said of many lads, however bold and fearless they may seem.'

Esther could hardly tell why she felt this as some reflection upon Dick's courage, but she said, after a few minutes silence, 'Are Dick and Will as good friends as they used to be, Sergeant? They were brought up together, you know; Will was apprenticed to my uncle, too, and I always thought they were particular friends.'

'I can't tell, my lass, what Dick's feelings are towards Will,' said the sergeant, with some hesitation, 'but this I know, that Will is the very best and kindest friend that Dick ever had. But why do you ask, Esther? Does not Dick speak kindly of Will?'

'He hardly speaks of him at all, and that made me wonder.'

'Ah, indeed, glad to hear it; glad to hear he has got some shame in him;' muttered the sergeant, rising hastily from his chair. ''Tis getting late, Esther, I must be getting home; wish your mother good-night for me;' and off he walked, leaving Esther very much puzzled by his manner, and by the word or two she had overheard, and with some indefinite fears as to what was the real cause of the estrangement that seemed to exist between her lover and his old friends. She could see that he was not at ease with the sergeant, whose manner to Dick was somewhat chilly and contemptuous; and she longed to know, yet scarcely dared to ask, how he had displeased the kind old man, whom she had loved and respected from her childhood.

At last Will came home to Elmsdale for a week, and he came over to Stoneton in the course of a day or two, to see his old master. Esther and her mother chanced to be in the shop when he came in, and on glancing at Dick, who was busy packing up some draughts at the counter, she saw that his hands were trembling, and his face grew red and white by turns, and he seemed scarcely able to look up or speak to Will, and only gave his hand when Will held out his eagerly, and said, 'Well, Dick Lucas, old fellow, how are you?' with a friendly cordiality that he could hardly resist.

Mr. Harris insisted upon Will's remaining to supper, and asked Esther and her mother to return and share the meal. Dick seemed ill at ease the whole evening, and only roused himself to answer Will's questions, when his silence was remarked. Will evidently observed his discomfiture, and did his utmost to remove it; and when he rose to take leave, he asked Dick to walk part of the way home with him, and when he hesitated, said, 'Oh, you must come; Mr. Harris will spare you for an hour, I am sure.'

What passed between them Esther could not guess; but she saw that Dick seemed rather less moody the next day, but still often sad and depressed. He brightened up, and listened eagerly when Mr. Harris spoke of Will's prospects, and of his being high in Mr. Benson's favour, and likely to get on, and to do well in his trade; and Esther heard him say in a low voice, 'Thank God for that.'

But this only increased her perplexity, and she resolved to take the first opportunity of asking Dick, in plain words, what was the cause of his moody fits, and what connection Will had with the wound which she strongly suspected lay hidden in his heart.

Another circumstance made her uncomfortable about him. A disreputable looking man accosted him one evening when they

were walking home from Church, and Dick seemed much startled and disturbed by the sight of him; and bidding Esther wait a few minutes for him, led the man aside, and held a hasty conversation with him, which ended in his giving him some money, and returning hastily to Esther's side, with a troubled countenance and flurried manner.

They walked some way in silence; and then Esther, laying her hand upon his arm, said gently and affectionately, 'Dick, you do not trust me as I trust you.'

'What do you mean, Esther? not trust you! how can you say so?'

'No, you do not trust me thoroughly; I tell you all my troubles and worries, but you do not tell me yours. Dick, love, it is not treating me kindly not to give me a share in your cares. Something is troubling you sadly, I am sure it is. I have long seen that you had something on your mind—and since Christmas Day I have been sure of it; and forgive me, Dick, I have an idea what it is.'

'What it is! impossible! Who can have told you? not the sergeant—not Will—no, he'd never betray me!' said Dick incoherently.

'Then I am right, Dick; it is something on your conscience—something you're afraid to tell.' And she turned her eyes searchingly

upon his tell-tale countenance, and said persuasively, 'Tell me all about it, Dick.'

'Tell you! how can I tell you? you, good, gentle, lovely, holy, as you are! how can I tell you what will make you despise me and cast me off for ever?'

Esther started back terrified; but recovering herself, said, 'Nay, Dick, I am sure you can't have done anything so fearfully wicked as you would have me believe; nothing but what you have repented of long ago, and what I may forgive, and shall forgive.'

'Repented! ah, in truth I have repented, if unhappiness means repentance; I have scarcely known a moment's peace since Will left Stoneton. But what will you say to me, Esther, if I tell you that I am a wretched coward, afraid to meet the consequences of my own sin, and have left another to bear the blame that should have been mine? Yes, look at me, Esther, and despise me as I despise myself, and as yonder wretched beggar despises me for my cowardice.'

'What you, Dick! Dick Dreadnought a coward! surely not. You are taking some silly deed of school-days to heart, are you not? Nay, calm yourself, Dick, and don't turn away from me. Let me share the pain and the shame, whatever it is. Am I not your promised wife, dear Dick? and must there not be perfect confidence between us?

Now come and sit down here under the trees, and tell me all about it quietly.'

'Well, I will tell you,' said Dick despairingly; 'you have a right to know what sort of a fellow you would have for a husband; and I ought to have told you before, but—'

'But you have not trusted my affection, Dick. Now let me hear.'

And Dick told her all; went through the whole miserable story, from Robert Pope's first temptation, to the poaching expedition and its results; and recounted his cowardly conduct to Will, and Will's noble self-sacrifice: and wound up the tale with a description of his misery, and a despairing resignation of Esther's love, of which he acknowledged himself, with broken words and bitter sobs, utterly unworthy.

Esther heard him to the end, without any evidence of feeling but the tight and convulsive pressure of her hand upon his arm, as if she would fain hear all, and suffer nothing to be concealed from her; but when he tried to withdraw his arm from her, and gasped out, 'Fare thee well, Esther, my own Esther; I must lose thee, I know; I deserve it; but don't let me see your contempt, Esther, I can't bear it; let me go without a word.'

'No, no, Dick,' she said in a broken voice, '*you must not* leave me yet. Hear what I

have to say. Dick, you must make amends for this; you must pluck out these cowardly fears by the roots; you must confess all that you have done, and clear the cloud upon Will's fair name; and then—'

'Then I must rush away somewhere, it matters not where, and hide my head.'

'Not so, Dick: you must rouse your courage up to meet the blame you have deserved. The scorn you dread must fall upon you, I am afraid; but what of that? bear it bravely, Dick, and humbly too, as fitting punishment for your sin. Do all you can to repair the past; make full atonement to Will, by freely confessing to all who have heard the evil reports of former days, that you were the culprit, and that he was blamed unjustly; and then, Dick, I shall begin to respect you again.'

'Respect me! you, Esther! it is impossible! And what will your mother say? and your uncle? They will never give you to me, a miserable coward, whom they must always despise!' he exclaimed vehemently, starting up from his seat, and almost shaking her hand off.

'Nay, Dick, this is not repentance; this is despair,' she said; 'and you must not give way to it. Now come home with me; and to-morrow you shall tell my mother and my uncle all that you have told to me; and I

will stand by you, Dick, and try to help you to meet the pain and shame which must come upon you.'

'And if they bid you give me up?'

'I do not think they will. My mother is tender-hearted, and very fond of you; she will forgive you, I am sure; and my uncle perhaps in time; but he will be very angry; and it may be that his regard for the world's opinion will hinder him from consenting to our marriage at present; and if so, we must submit to wait, Dick, till you have lived this down, and gained a fresh character for yourself.'

And so they went home, the brave young girl bearing up under the burthen and weight of her lover's guilt, to soothe and encourage him to atone for it, in the only way that was now in his power, by a full and free confession. And wretched and shame-stricken as Dick was, his heart felt lighter, even then, than it had done whilst he was struggling against the consciousness of guilt, which was ever weighing him down.

Shocked and amazed as Esther's mother was, when the sad tale was unfolded to her, her tender heart was full of compassion for the offender; and she refused to consent to her brother's indignant demand, that he should be banished for ever, and that all engagement between the lovers should be broken off.

'No, Brother,' she said; 'Esther is old enough to judge for herself, and she will not willingly give him up. Let us wait and see what his conduct is when this mystery is cleared up; time enough then to break it off, if it is not satisfactory.'

'But what will Styles say—what will the neighbours think, if they hear of my niece being engaged to a man who has consorted with poachers, and might have been taken up, and committed to prison? It is enough to drive one wild! a youth too, whom I've treated as a son!'

'And who will be a son to you yet, Uncle; have patience with him awhile, and don't drive him to despair with your reproaches,' said Esther, who had heard his last words as she came into the room. 'He will yet be all that we can wish: you will see his penitence is sincere; and I for one will not desert him in this time of trial. If he goes bravely through it, and submits humbly to bear all the scorn his conduct will bring upon him, I shall respect him far more than I ever could have done, while I saw him striving to hide his fault, and unable to bear the light upon his past life. I felt sure something wrong was going on, which was poisoning his peace by self-reproach; and I never should have rested till he had thrown the burthen off.'

Humbly, penitently, and bravely, Dick went through the ordeal of self-exposure. He gained his master's permission to go to London, to see Mr. Benson, and lay all the facts before him; and fully exonerated Will from all suspicion, bearing witness unflinchingly to his self-sacrifice; and when Will shook him heartily by the hand, and entreated him to say no more, and to believe in his entire forgiveness, assuring him that his present conduct in acknowledging his cowardice claimed his sincere respect, he refused to be satisfied till he had made full confession to Will's father and mother—and what was harder still, to his honourable old soldier cousin; and his contrition seemed so genuine and earnest, and his desire to atone for the past so real, that the sergeant's stern face softened as he listened to him; and he laid his hand kindly on his shoulder, saying, 'God forgive you, lad, as fully and freely as we forgive you. You have done what you could to make amends for the past; and you'll be a brave and honest man yet, with God's blessing. Take my word for it, 'tis a braver act you've done now in telling us the truth, than going up to the enemy's guns; and good will come of your first steady effort to do right. Give my love to *Esther*, and tell her what I say; she has brave and steadfast heart, as all true wome

have; and she'll stand by you through all, I'm sure, or she is not the girl I take her to be.'

Dick left the cottage quite overcome, yet with a bright gleam of hope breaking through the dark clouds that hung about him. Day by day he persevered in patiently bearing the sneers and reproaches that his late confession brought upon him, and the distrust and contempt which his master exhibited towards him; and in time he had his reward.

Mr. Harris at first refused to allow him to remain in his service, but Esther's and her mother's entreaties at length prevailed; and gladly as Dick would have left the town, where his name was bandied about with scorn and insulting compassion, and have begun life afresh in some place where he was not known, he felt that if Mr. Harris would allow him to remain with him, it would be right to stay and bear his punishment meekly.

Mr. Harris only consented, on condition that Esther should go to her father's sister in London for a year, and that during that time no communication should take place between her and Dick. And Esther submitted to his wishes, though she would gladly have been by his side during the painful days that were before him; while he

felt only too thankful to be allowed ever to think of her again, to say one word of remonstrance.

In the course of time, Esther returned to her mother and uncle; and finding that her affections were unchanged, and that Dick's steady conduct and patience were gaining the esteem of his neighbours, Mr. Harris made no further objection to the marriage.

Will and his uncle, the sergeant, were the most honoured guests at the wedding. And Dick never forgot his obligations to his friend; and in after years was always wont to hold him up to the respect and gratitude of his children, as an example of true courage and unselfish friendship. He and his wife remained with Mr. Harris till his death, when the business came into his own hands.

Will Dalton remained with Mr. Benson, and was in due time taken into partnership with him; and the last news of him gave a report that he was likely to follow his friend's example, and to take to himself a wife, as gentle and as high-principled as her cousin and friend, Esther Lucas.

'IT LOOKS SO!'

'IT LOOKS SO!'

In the 'Chronicles of Carlingford,' recorded in a well-known popular periodical, the difficulties of a young Dissenting Minister in dealing with the 'shop-ocracy,' so to speak, of his congregation, are admirably pourtrayed.

In any religious community, where the minister is entirely dependent upon the voluntary contributions of his flock, the attempt to preserve their good opinion without sacrificing his own dignity and self-respect, must necessarily be more difficult than in the English Church, where a young clergyman holds his appointment from his rector or vicar, and is not indebted for his bread to the favour which he may obtain from his congregation.

Still the position of an ardent young Curate, beginning his ministry in a small country town, is often very much affected by the heart-burnings which too often prevail

amongst tradespeople, and which are mainly caused by the struggle which is continually going on amongst them, to tread on the heels of those in the rank immediately above them, and to keep down the aspiring spirits of those immediately beneath them, who have the same end in view. Suppose him entering upon his work with the most anxious desire to conciliate all classes, and to be 'all things to all men, that he might by all means save some,' with very little idea of 'giving himself airs,' (to use a common accusation made by inferiors against those above them,) and desirous to meet all his parishioners on one common ground, and with one straightforward desire to help them onward in the path of salvation; his attempts to win their confidence will be sadly marred where these feelings prevail, and he is all day long in danger of outraging prejudices of caste, which would never occur to him as likely to be so virulent, in those whom he has been accustomed to distinguish as 'the middle classes.' In a rising place, the different degrees of education which ordinarily prevail, and cannot at all be measured by the several positions in which the parties seem to be placed, make his difficulties greater.

We will mention an instance in the little *rising* town of Doveton, where Mr. Wilmot, *a gentleman* and a scholar, came to begin his

ministry, and to take charge of the parish, in the absence of a consumptive rector. He found Mr. Hopkins, the general dealer, and Mr. Benton, who kept a tiny bookseller's and stationer's shop, far more able to give an opinion on parish matters, &c. than the draper, whose large shop, and many 'young people' employed, constituted him the principal tradesman; yet he would give very great offence were he to class them as equals, or invite them to a tea-party together. They are too poor to dress or to live after the fashion of their more prosperous neighbour; and he, who began life as a shop-boy, with no education beyond that which he could obtain at the small parochial school of the village in which he was born, has risen to his present position through the fortunate circumstance of his attracting the notice of a smart ladies'-maid, by his civility and attention as a shopman. When her mistress died, and left her the legacy she well deserved for her long services, she was persuaded to share her fortune with her young admirer; a large stock was purchased, and they established a shop in the principal street of the town, gained friends and custom, and all went well and prosperously with them.

Mrs. Fletcher's great weakness was her excessive regard to appearances; her education had been as scanty as that of her

husband. She was very early apprenticed to a milliner and dress-maker, and then sent into service as school-room maid. When the governess left the family, she was promoted to wait on the young ladies, and finally the eldest daughter engaged her as her maid when she married, and left her old home for a very fashionable dashing life in the highest ranks of society. Here she had heard so much talk of dress and looks, amongst the ladies'-maids who came to the house with their mistresses, that it was not to be wondered at that her standard of merit was very much influenced by external appearance; and it might be doubted whether her really warm kind heart would have been won by George Fletcher's attentions, had not his looks and manner been so much in his favour, as to warrant her in the belief that he would be likely to attract custom, and that the shop would become a profitable business. She made him a very good wife; was very energetic in her department of millinery, and they were a very respectable well-conducted couple; brought up their son and two daughters very creditably, and deserved the respect of their neighbours.

Johnnie, the darling of his mother's heart, was a bright merry youth of sixteen, at the *time* my tale begins; and Sir John Trent, *her old master*, had taken care that his god-

son and namesake should be well and sensibly educated at a commercial school in the neighbourhood. His two sisters, Fanny and Isabella, now seventeen and fifteen, had been brought up at a boarding-school, and were rather too fine and exclusive to please their more sensible and hearty brother. However, they were very fond and proud of him, and in a fair way of being laughed out of a good deal of what he called nonsense and finery. He was too dutiful a lad to quiz his mother, but he had no mercy on the little bits of absurd pretence he detected in his sisters, and their favourite exclamation of 'It looks so!' whenever they were asked to do anything which they thought below the dignity of the daughters of the first tradesman in the town, was never allowed to pass without a good-natured sarcasm. Indeed, he was once heard to mutter in a kind of soliloquy a scrap of Latin, which he had picked up in one of his school-books, 'Esse quam videre malim,' which his sisters thought sounded so grand and learned, that they insisted upon knowing its meaning, and were rather taken aback when he explained it as 'I had rather be, than seem to be.' His father was sitting silently by, whilst the girls were tormenting their brother to tell them what he meant by the words they had overheard, when Fanny was calling to Isabella to make haste down

or they would be late for Church, winding up with 'It looks so, not to be there before the clergyman begins the service'—and he exclaimed, 'That's right, Johnnie, no pretence for me, I like folks to *be* what they profess; humbug don't go down with me, and never would.'

'Well—but—Papa,' said Fanny, as if defending herself from some accusation, 'Johnnie said that, because I told Bella to make haste or we should be late for Church; and it looks so not to be in time for the service. There wasn't any humbug in that!'

'No,' said Johnnie; 'but I don't think you gave the best reason for not being late.'

'It was a very good reason, I think; I am sure I always hate to see people coming into Church in the Psalms, or in the middle of the First Lesson; and I don't think I ever could have the face to do it—with all the people standing up, or sitting down, and looking at me! I often wonder what Mr. Wilmot thinks of them! bustling in when he is reading, without any respect to him!'

'Worse too, I should say, Fan, without any respect to Him Whose House it is, and Whose Word he is reading.'

'Ah! I see now what you meant, Johnnie,' exclaimed Bella, who was very fond of her *brother,* and set much store by his remarks. '*To be sure,* that was a better reason for

being in time than what people would think of us, or Mr. Wilmot either.'

'Well, I'm sure, Bella, you would not like to lose Mr. Wilmot's good opinion,' observed Fanny good-humouredly; 'you always look so pleased when he smiles and notices you, more even than when Sir John nods and says, "How d'ye do, little one?"'

'I dare say I do,' said Bella; 'Mr. Wilmot is so good, and Mary Benton says he is so kind to the poor people and the school-children, and they are all so fond of him. —Mamma, I wish you'd let me teach at the Sunday-school as Mary Benton does; she says she is sure Mr. Wilmot would be glad if we did; and there are so few teachers now—only Jane Hopkins and herself, besides the schoolmistress.'

'That's just it, Bella,' said Mrs. Fletcher, in a discouraging tone.

'Just what, Mamma?'

'Just why I don't like you to go mixing yourselves up with those beneath you. If there were anybody else—bettermost tradesmen's daughters now, or ladies, I shouldn't mind; but I don't want my girls to be hand and glove with Mary Benton and Jane Hopkins.'

'Why not, Mother?' asked Johnnie, looking up from his book. 'They're very good girls; what harm could they do to Fan and Bella?'

'Harm? I don't think they'd do them any harm, Johnnie,' said Mrs. Fletcher; 'I've nothing to say against them, they're very good girls in their way; but I want my daughters to look higher, and keep company with their equals; Mrs. Benton and John Hopkins keep no servant, and the girls do all the work of the house.'

'They are none the worse for that, Mother, surely,' said John; 'I for one respect them for it; you wouldn't have them sit down with their hands before them, and let their mothers slave and scrub, and do nothing to help them.'

'No, to be sure not, I don't want them to be fine ladies, I'm sure; only with their rough hands and plain cotton frocks, they don't seem fit company for my girls, that never need soil their fingers with work, and I should not like to see them about together for ever. It is all very well to be civil and neighbourly, and so on; but Bella there would be for making a bosom friend of Mary Benton if I'd allow it.'

John sighed. 'I don't think she could find a safer or better friend, Mother dear,' he said. He was too respectful to say more, but he felt pained by this fresh proof of what he could not help thinking sounded like worldliness in his mother. His father, however, interposed with, 'Nay, Lucy, I don't

want my girls to be proud stuck-up lasses, or to think themselves better than their neighbours. Samuel Benton is a very worthy man, and has brought up his boy and girl as carefully as any tradesman could do; and I should be ashamed to look down upon him, because he has not so many pounds in the bank as I have; and who knows—luck changes, and there are many ups and downs in trade—he may be better off than I am some day.' So saying, and rising from his seat, George Fletcher put an end to the conversation by calling the maid to 'clear away the supper-things.'

Some days after this, Mr. Wilmot came into the shop, and after a friendly greeting to George Fletcher and his son, (who acted as clerk to his father, and kept the books, whilst he and his two assistants served their customers,) explained the purpose of his visit to be to ask for assistance at the Sunday-school, and at a night-school which he was desirous to establish.

'It is the only way,' he said, 'to get hold of the young men who have left school. Most of the lads whom I have been preparing for Confirmation can manage to come in the winter evenings; and if I can get a good staff of assistants, I make no doubt we shall get on. May I count on your aid, Fletcher?' he added, looking at Johnnie.

'I shall be very glad to be of use, Sir,' he replied; 'I am always at leisure in the evenings, and can promise to attend regularly whenever you purpose keeping school; for you mean to be there yourself, I conclude?'

'Oh yes, of course; the schoolmaster has enough to do with his daily work, and I cannot ask for his evenings too; so I am beating up for recruits, you see; and I hope I shall be as successful elsewhere as I have been in my first application. Good-day, and many thanks for your willingness to help me. —By-the-way, you have two daughters, have you not, Mr. Fletcher?' he said, turning to the father; 'do you think they would be equally ready to give their aid in the Sunday-school? We want teachers for the elder girls sadly, and have only Miss Benton and Miss Hopkins to help us.'

'I don't think their mother would like to spare them, Sir,' said Mr. Fletcher, hesitatingly; 'they have never been accustomed to anything of the sort, and—'

'Oh! we would soon put them in the way of teaching,' said Mr. Wilmot; 'but I must not seize upon all your children. Perhaps Mrs. Fletcher will let one of her daughters assist us some day; but I will be content with what I have gained now.—I will let you know what evening we fix upon for our *school opening*, Fletcher—good-day.' And *away he walked.*

Mrs. Fletcher expressed a good deal of surprise at the young clergyman's demeaning himself, as she expressed it, to keep school, and said that gentlefolks had strange fancies; but could make no objection to her son's joining the staff in such good company—decidedly saying, however, that she would not let Fanny and Isabella teach; and repeating her determination to Mr. Wilmot, when he met and stopped her to compliment her on her son's efficiency at the night-school. 'I assure you he is quite my right hand man, Mrs. Fletcher,' he said; 'he explains everything so clearly, and is so patient and good-humoured with his scholars, that I don't know what I should do without him. Can't you provide me with as good a teacher for my Sunday-school?'

'Johnnie is very glad to be of use, I am sure, Sir,' she said; 'he has had a good education, thanks to Sir John Trent, his godfather, Sir; and his master always said he was one of his best scholars; but as to my girls, I should not much like them to go to the Sunday-school, unless some ladies or people of their own station were there.'

'What, you think we ought to have someone to keep us all in order, Mrs. Fletcher?' said the young clergyman, supposing that she thought her girls too young to be trusted to their own responsibility; 'well, you must

let me prefer my petition next spring, when I bring a lady to Doveton;' and with a half blush and a shy laugh, he bade her good-morning, whilst she smiled and said, 'To be sure, a lady would make a great difference—she should be very happy then,' and so on.

The night-school went on prosperously, all through the winter; the attendance increased; and when it was broken up at Easter, when the days grew longer, and the young men could not easily be spared from their occupations, many hopes were expressed that it would be resumed, when the return of winter gave them more leisure.

Immediately after Easter, Mr. Wilmot departed for a holiday of six weeks; and it was pretty well known that when he returned to Doveton, it would not be alone.

As the time drew near for his return, the excitement and anxiety to see his bride increased, and a great deal of gossip went on in the draper's shop, as to who she was, and what she was like, and whether she would be high, or as friendly and kind as her husband.

'Well, it strikes me,' said Mrs. Fletcher, when her husband reported some of the conversation which had gone on amongst his customers, as they sat at supper, after the shop was closed, 'the lady will not quite *approve of* all Mr. Wilmot's goings on.'

'Oh, Mamma, what do you mean?' said Bella; 'not approve of his goings on! what is there that she can disapprove of?'

'Well, to my mind he is rather too free with his inferiors, treats everybody too much alike, and hardly seems to have pride enough; and I don't think his lady (and she is a real lady, mind you, own niece to Lady Stanhope, and has been brought up, as one may say, by her,) will like him to be always teaching rough lads, and consorting with the young tradesmen.'

'Johnnie, for instance,' suggested her husband, with a sly smile.

'Johnnie is fit company for anyone,' said the mother proudly; 'Mr. Wilmot told me the other day he was quite his right hand; but they are not all like him.'

'Why, Mother dear,' said Johnnie, 'you don't know Benton and Taylor; they are as steady good lads as you could meet with anywhere, and Benton has had quite as good an education as myself; his father has taken such pains with him and his sister too. And Mr. Wilmot is a real gentleman, I take it, and knows how to be friendly and kind without what you call "demeaning himself;" he will not give or take liberties, and I don't think he would marry a fine lady, who would not be fit for a clergyman's wife. However, we shall soon know what she is—Mr. and

Mrs. Wilmot come home to-morrow evening.'

'I hope the bells will be set ringing,' said Fanny.

'Oh yes, of course, the ringers will give them a merry peal, and we mean to put up arches of evergreens for them to pass under.'

'Do you? I am very glad, Johnnie,' exclaimed Bella; 'how pretty they will be!'

In due time, speculations gave place to comments. The bride was seen at Church on Sunday, and before long most of the townspeople were familiar with her appearance. All agreed that she was very pretty; she had a tall slender figure, dark eyes, and dark hair; but some were disposed to think her proud, and others declared that the sweet gentle smile spoke otherwise. Her dress underwent similar criticisms; some thought it exactly suitable to her position, while others thought it was much too plain, and not fashionable enough for Lady Stanhope's niece.

She began at once to visit the poor and to teach in the schools, and before long came with Mr. Wilmot to invite Mrs. Fletcher's daughters to join her. She was somewhat puzzled by the hints the mother threw out of her former objections.

'You are particular about their companions,' she said; 'quite right, I am sure;

but we have only Miss Benton and Mr. Hopkins's daughter at present, and they seem such nice quiet girls, you can't object to them, surely. Besides, we have no time for gossiping, it is all hard work; and indeed the classes are so large now, that I shall be very glad to divide them. I have nearly thirty in my class, and I shall be very thankful if Miss Fletcher will relieve me of some of them; and your youngest daughter shall have a class of smaller girls; you will not mind teaching little children,' she added smilingly to Bella.

'Oh! I shall like it very much, Ma'am, only I am afraid I shall be very dull about it at first.'

'Everyone must have a beginning, you know; and if you are in any difficulty, Miss Benton will help you, I am sure.'

As she walked away with her husband, she said, 'I could not quite understand Mrs. Fletcher, Henry; what could she mean by her objection to her daughters' associating with Mary Benton and Jane Hopkins?'

Mr. Wilmot laughed. 'It puzzled me at first,' he said; 'and I supposed she thought the young folks too giddy to be trusted without a matronly head; but I fancy there is some foolish feeling of pride at the bottom of her objections. You have no idea of the absurd distinctions in the middle classes, and

how one shopkeeper looks down upon another because he is less flourishing, or has no assistant under him; and the wives are still more particular as to their associates. I found out incidentally from John Fletcher that his mother did not approve of Mary Benton or Jane Hopkins being her daughters' friends or companions, considering them beneath them.'

'How very absurd!' exclaimed Mrs. Wilmot. 'Mary Benton seems so quiet and refined, and her manner shows her to have been so well educated, I should judge that she is much more of a lady than Miss Fletcher, whose little affectations put me rather out of patience, I confess. The younger girl is much more pleasing.'

'Yes; the brother has good influence there. The girls have been brought up at a second-rate boarding-school, and I should fancy their education to be rather superficial.'

'I dare say; there were numerous specimens of inferior paintings and nic-nacs about the room; and when I observed to Miss Fletcher, "I suppose you have not much time for fancy-work, now you have left school," she answered, "Oh yes, indeed, we have nothing else to do, except a little practising and drawing in the morning. Mamma likes us to keep up our accomplishments:" and Mrs. Fletcher looked rather affronted,

and said, "My girls need never soil their fingers, I assure you, Mrs. Wilmot." I hardly knew how to answer, so I only said something about supposing that they assisted her in household affairs, or in her business; to which she replied that they kept a servant, and had several young people in the work-room; and I found I had made a mistake in supposing that they made themselves useful.'

The two girls went pretty regularly to the Sunday-school, though from time to time Miss Fletcher absented herself on the plea of a cold or a head-ache; and on a rainy Sunday their mother thought it quite impossible for them to go so far.

Bella represented in vain that she never caught cold, and that Mary Benton had much farther to walk in the rain; her mother said, 'It was all very well for those who had bonnets and dresses that no weather could spoil; she would not have their nice dresses spoilt, tramping about in the rain.'

There was a grand school feast on the lawn at the Rectory, at the breaking-up of the school for the summer holidays, when the harvest began; and the school-teachers were asked to assist Mrs. Wilmot in waiting upon the children on the lawn, and invited to drink tea at the Rectory afterwards.

Mr. and Mrs. Wilmot did all in their power to amuse their guests; and the young

Stanhopes, Mrs. Wilmot's cousins, were very pleasant and merry, so that the party was entirely successful; but as John escorted his sisters home at night, Bella seemed grave, and on his noticing it, she said—

'O Johnnie, I wish I knew half as much as Mary Benton does; I felt so stupid and awkward, sitting up there without being able to say a word, or hardly knowing what they were talking about; and when Mr. Wilmot's brother was showing us his microscope, I could not half enjoy what I saw, for I did not understand his explanations, and I saw he thought me shamefully ignorant—and so I am,' said the poor girl sorrowfully.

'It's never too late to learn, Bella,' said her brother kindly; 'if you like, we'll ask mother to let you read with me for an hour in the evening; and Mary Benton will lend you some of her books, I am sure.'

'Oh, thank you, Johnnie, I should like that very much. I want to read sensible books that really teach one something; not like those silly novels we used to get from the circulating library at Miss Johnson's.'

'I am sure, Bella, they were very entertaining stories,' interrupted Fanny; and they are what all the ladies read; and all about lords and ladies too, some of them. I do like to know what great people say and do.'

Johnnie laughed. 'Judging from some of

the books that your smart friends, the Miss Pearsons, lent you last summer,' he said, 'I should guess that you would not get very true ideas of great people from them. I thought there was the greatest rubbish I ever read in one of them that I looked into, all about lords and baronets, disguised as artists and pedlars, making love to farmers' daughters and dairy-maids—and children changed at nurse—and poor boys and girls turning out heirs and heiresses—and things of that sort, that are very little likely to happen in these days.'

'Well, but, Johnnie, why do ladies read them if they are such nonsense? Miss Johnson says all the first families subscribe to her library, and she has all the most fashionable novels from Town.

'Ladies must read something else besides novels, though, Fanny,' observed Isabella. 'Mrs. Wilmot and her cousins, even the very youngest of the little ladies, knew all about the places Captain Wilmot had visited in his voyages; and they understood all the facts in natural History, as he called them, that he spoke of when he was showing us the butterflies' wings, and the leaves and bark of the trees, in his microscope. I heard little Miss Georgey talking to Mary Benton about the feathers on the butterflies' wings.'

'Feathers on a butterfly's wing? no, surely, Bella!' interrupted Fanny.

'I was as much surprised as you are, when she began speaking of them,' said Bella; 'but Mary knew all about it, and said all the little bits of dust that we saw on the wings were perfect feathers; and when I looked through the glass I saw them; and the little lady told me all about the flies' feet, and how they were made so as to enable them to walk about on the ceiling upside down; and about the ants and their negro slaves, and the bees and their queen, and the working bees, and the young bees that are shut up in their nurseries and fed by the workers. I did wish I had learnt all those things, instead of all the useless things Miss Abel taught us—but here we are at home.—Johnnie, you won't forget to ask mother if I may read with you?' she whispered, as the servant opened the door, and they went up the steps.

Towards the end of the next autumn, a good deal of illness prevailed at Doveton, and both Mr. Wilmot and his wife were fully occupied by the sick people, so had not much time for other visits.

One day, however, Mrs. Wilmot came hurriedly into Mr. Fletcher's shop, asking if she could speak to his wife; and when Mrs. Fletcher invited her into the parlour, she began eagerly, 'Oh! Mrs. Fletcher, I want

your advice. Will you tell me what to do for poor Widow Jones's baby? it is so dreadfully scalded, and the doctor is away from home, and not likely to be back for some hours; and the poor little thing is moaning so sadly, and the mother half frantic.'

'Cotton wool, or flour, are the very best remedies for bad scalds or burns,' said Mrs. Fletcher; 'we have plenty of cotton wool in the shop, I will get some sheets directly.'

She ran off, and returned with a roll. 'But, oh dear,' she said, 'I quite forgot that my girl is gone out, and how to send it I can't think—none of my young people are in just now; one is ill, and the other two are gone with some caps to Mrs. Fenton; what shall we do? I am afraid I cannot send it, Ma'am, till the girl comes home in the evening; she shall go with it the very instant she returns.'

'Oh, I'll take it, I'll take it—thank you, Mrs. Fletcher, that will do famously,' said Mrs. Wilmot, seizing upon the wadding.

'But you can't walk through the streets with that great bundle under your arm, Ma'am. It looks so for a lady to be carrying such a parcel! I wouldn't let one of my girls be seen with it.'

'Oh yes, I can; I can carry it perfectly—I could not wait till your girl comes home;

think of the poor little thing suffering all those hours! and there is nothing done for it yet! only tell me whether I am to put any sweet oil, or ointment, or anything, and I will be off:' and away she went, leaving Mrs. Fletcher watching her in mute surprise, hurrying away with the roll of wadding under her arm.

She was turning back from the door, when two fashionably dressed young girls and a young man with a tremendous display of moustache and beard, came up and accosted her with an inquiry whether Miss Fletcher were at home, and a request that she might be told that her friends the Miss Pearsons were come to see her.

'Pray come in,' said Mrs. Fletcher, much impressed by their smart dress and demeanour; 'my daughter will be delighted to see you—and this gentleman?'

'My brother.'

'I hope she will be equally ready to welcome me,' he said, with a coxcombical smile, and twisting his moustaches. 'I had the pleasure of meeting Miss Fletcher at the flower show at Hoxton in the summer,' he added, as they followed Mrs. Fletcher into the parlour, where Fanny was lolling in an arm-chair, reading a novel. She jumped up, however, when she saw her friends, and welcomed them very affectionately. The

young man watched his sisters' reception with rather a satirical air, and observed, 'Upon my word, Jane, you are highly honoured; I wish I was in your place:' a remark which seemed to Mr. Fletcher, who entered the room at the moment, somewhat impertinent; and as he surveyed his visitor, he congratulated himself that his boy John did not set up for a gentleman, if the result were to be that he would become such a conceited dandy as James Pearson. Mrs. Fletcher however, and Fanny, were charmed with all the party; and on finding that they were staying with their uncle, who was a gentleman farmer in the neighbourhood, they warmly pressed them to call again; and the young people promised to do so when their visit had been returned, which they insisted upon as indispensable, begging further that Fanny and Isabella would persuade their brother to escort them to a party, which they had coaxed their uncle into giving, during their visit to him, and which was to take place that day week.

When John came in to supper the invitation was delivered to him, but he seemed very little disposed to accept it, and said at once that unless his sisters wanted his escort, he would rather not go to Mr. Poole's; adding in an undertone to his mother, 'Robert Poole is not very steady, or his

cousin either; do you think Fanny had better go, Mother?'

'Well, I don't know, I declare; it will look so to refuse, and they seem such fashionable young people in their dress and manners, and the young man looked quite the gentleman.'

'Oh, we must go, Johnnie,' exclaimed Fanny, who had overheard a word or two; 'we accepted the invitation, and it would look so odd not to go, and be very rude.'

'You will go with us, won't you, Johnnie?' said Isabella entreatingly; 'I don't think I can go without you:' and Johnnie, unwilling to let his sisters go alone to a house where he was very sorry that they should have acquaintance at all, yielded and accompanied them.

One visit brought on another, and the intimacy between Fanny and her former school-fellows, which had been very slight since they had left school, increased, very much to John's regret. They were silly affected girls; vain and idle, and likely to foster her failings; and he was alarmed at the prospect of his sisters' acquaintance with the young men. His remonstrances were useless, however; his mother could not see anything amiss in people who lived in style, and seemed to have plenty of everything, and had a dashing fashionable air. She had a vague idea that all young gentlemen were

wild and fond of pleasure, and was disposed to look leniently upon vices at which John hinted, because she supposed them to be a mark of gentility; so she persisted in encouraging their visits, and was flattered rather than alarmed when her neighbours hinted at Mr. Pearson's attentions to Miss Fanny. Isabella viewed them very differently. Young as she was, she was able to see the coarse nature hidden under the affected manner of a would-be fine gentleman, and she never willingly went to Fullgrove. Mrs. Fletcher was at last somewhat startled by Mr. Wilmot's grave look, when he met her and her daughters out walking, accompanied by young Pearson; and he took an early opportunity of asking her whether she was aware of the character the young man bore, and warning her that he was no fit admirer for any modest girl. 'I assure you he does as much harm in his parish, Mrs. Fletcher, as any youth in his station can well do: he is thoroughly unprincipled, and leads a most dissipated life. I wondered,' he said, 'to see him with you, and that he should be talking and whispering so familiarly to Miss Fletcher.'

'Why, you see, Sir,' she said hesitatingly, feeling the reproach, 'his sisters were at school with Fanny, and they all seemed such genteel people, and took such notice of her, and I thought they would help her on in life,

and introduce her to their fashionable friends, and—'

'And bring about a fashionable marriage, I suppose,' said Mr. Wilmot, smiling; 'but really, Mrs. Fletcher, you don't know what you are doing by encouraging that young man here. Believe me, your daughter could not well have a more miserable lot than to be married to James Pearson. I don't wish to speak evil of any man; but it is only right to caution you. Let your husband or son inquire into his character, and I am sure they will soon be satisfied that you ought to break off this intimacy. I only hope no mischief has been done.—Walk part of the way home with me, Fletcher,' he said to John, as he appeared at the door, 'will you? I have something to say to you;' and he gave the brother sufficient reasons for his interference, to induce him to urge his mother strongly on his return to put an end to James Pearson's visits; and a word or two to his father caused him to exert his authority, and forbid all further intimacy between the families.

Fanny cried and pouted, and remonstrated, and was very unhappy, and very indignant with her brother and Mr. Wilmot for their interference; but John's constant kindness and affectionate attentions gradually removed the cloud between them; and some stories

which she could not avoid hearing of her lover's profligacy, awakened her at last to the peril she had escaped. Her friend Jane Pearson's elopement, soon afterwards, with a wild young squire of a neighbouring parish, effectually weaned her from her fashionable friends; but not until she had fretted, and become discontented and dissatisfied with her home, and ashamed of her father's business, and less fit than ever to fill the niche in which Providence had placed her, worthily.

Isabella gave her brother much less uneasiness, and seemed in the way to become sensible and useful; she had no hankering for a higher grade of life, and her affection for her father and brother made her chiefly anxious to please them, whilst her appreciation of Mr. and Mrs. Wilmot gave her more just ideas of true refinement, and enabled her to discover the tinsel under the gloss of fashion and pretension. Her ambition was still to be as useful and sensible as Mary Benton; but as her mother disapproved of the friendship, John could not promote the intimacy, gladly as he would have seen her his sister's friend, and much as it cost him to keep his own feelings towards her unexpressed. He had once hinted his wishes to his mother, but had been so decidedly checked by her vexation and disappointment, that he resolved to wait

patiently till time had proved the firmness of his affection, and his mother should have become reconciled to the idea; and he lived in hopes of some opportunity of making Mary Benton's admirable qualities known to his mother.

The opportunity came in a shape which he had not expected, and was brought about by a sorrowful cause, his mother's serious illness. She had been more or less ailing for some weeks, when she caught a violent cold, which was followed by an attack of bronchitis; and her anxiety to get about, when she ought to have been in bed, retarded her recovery. Then, although she did not own it, she had been a good deal shocked and grieved by the discovery of James Pearson's delinquencies, and her daughter's evident unhappiness weighed upon her mind; she could not but feel self-reproachful when she remembered John's warnings on his first visit; her plans, too, for what she considered her daughter's aggrandisement had been rudely overthrown, and she shunned her neighbours' condolences and inquisitive looks, as if they gave her an additional pang.

Worldly and short-sighted as her views for her children were, she was a very affectionate mother, and Fanny's peevishness and discontent were a continual grief to her. The ambitious schemes she had been forming for

her son had also fallen to the ground, and she could not conceal from herself that his heart was bestowed upon a girl whom she looked upon as beneath him, and whose intimacy with her children she had always avoided. She could not bring herself to do what she knew would make him happy, yet grieved over his grave looks, and felt his patient dutifulness a continual reproach to her. So she felt disappointed altogether; her spirits were depressed by illness, a low nervous fever grew upon her, she lost appetite and strength; and when her husband insisted upon her seeing Dr. Fisher, he thoroughly alarmed the whole family, by his opinion that only the most constant care and good nursing would avert fatal consequences. 'Your wife must put away all her household cares, and leave her millinery to her assistants, Mr. Fletcher,' he said, 'and take perfect rest for a time.'

'Impossible,' said Mrs. Fletcher faintly; 'I must see to the cooking, and the young people must be overlooked.'

'But, surely your daughters—you have two girls, I think—can save you all this; one can look after the servant-girl, and the other preside in the work-room.'

Mrs. Fletcher shook her head.

'What! too fine to do anything but cut holes in a bit of muslin, and sew them up

again, and jingle dance-tunes upon a piano,' said Dr. Fisher abruptly; 'that comes of sending girls to a boarding-school; they learn nothing there but how to waste their time. But that is not my business. What I have to do is to hinder you from killing yourself, and that you'll very soon do if you go on working yourself off your legs, when you require complete rest. Now remember, you are not to stir from your bed till I see you again, and take all the nourishing food you can. I will call again in a few days;' and the good doctor walked away, and gave peremptory injunctions to Mr. Fletcher that his orders should be obeyed. 'What a sad pity it is,' he said, 'that your daughters should be of no use to their mother at such a time as this! You should send them to take lessons of your neighbour Benton's daughter; she is one of the most handy careful housekeepers, and the best nurses, I ever saw, though she has plenty of book-learning too; and I used to think her father would make a mere book-worm of her once; but she is a good sensible girl, and I must say I envy the man that shall get her for a wife. Keep your wife quiet, Mr. Fletcher, and get some friend or neighbour to sit with her, and make her any nice nourishing little messes that she can fancy. Physic would be of little use here—a good nurse is more

wanted than a doctor; don't let her fidget about household matters or the millinery business. Her mind wants rest as well as her body.'

Mr. Fletcher sighed as the doctor went away; how to secure quiet and good nursing he did not know; and he began to think, as he had thought once or twice before, when visions of sickness or old age had come before him, that his girls' bringing up did not seem to have fitted them to be of much use to their parents, or likely to be good wives and mothers; and he repented that he had yielded to his wife's wishes, and had allowed them to spend their time in idle amusements and useless occupations. He called his son into council as to what was to be done whilst Mrs. Fletcher was up-stairs. John proposed to go to Holmedale, a village about fourteen miles off, and try to get his Aunt Susan to come and nurse his mother. 'She is a bit precise and old-fashioned, I know,' he said; 'but she has a kind heart, and will be very glad to come to her sister now that she is ill, I have no doubt; though she has been huffy with us for not noticing her more. If mother does not object, I will go at once, and see if she can contrive to come back with me.'

Mrs. Fletcher made no objection, though she sighed over the necessity of asking a favour of a sister whom she had slighted as

homely, and looked upon as very inferior to herself. She knew, too, that her sister would have as much contempt for Fanny's fine ladyism, as Fanny would feel for her want of refinement and education; so she foresaw uncomfortable scenes with her sister at the head of affairs; but a day's experience of Fanny's uselessness in the sick-room, convinced her that there was nothing else to be done.

John's journey was successful, and he returned to Doveton with his aunt, who on hearing of her sister's illness, packed up her clothes, shut up her cottage, left the key with a neighbour, and was ready to start as soon as the horse was rested. She knew very little of the girls, but had seen John from time to time, as he had made a point of going to see her whenever business took him into her neighbourhood, and she was propitiated by his pleasant face and respectful manner. As they drove along, she put several questions to him about his mother's illness, Dr. Fisher's opinion, and other matters, which proved that she had plenty of kind feeling and common sense under her rough unpolished manner. She asked about his sisters' occupations; and John was obliged to confess that they were of no use either in the kitchen or the work-room.

'*Bella will* be very glad to learn to be of

use, though, I am sure, Aunt, if you will take the trouble to teach her.'

'How comes it she has learnt nothing yet then?' said Miss Paxton abruptly. 'Never mind, lad, I guess how it is,' she added, as John coloured and hesitated; 'your poor mother was too much bent upon making fine ladies of her girls to let them learn anything useful. We'll see what we can do to make her comfortable, and your father too, while she is in her room. I am very glad you came for me.'

Matters went on pretty well for a week or two. Mrs. Fletcher was carefully nursed, and Mr. Fletcher's comforts studiously attended to; Martha the servant was kept at work, and Miss Paxton did her best to take her sister's place in the family; but with all her good intentions, there was a general feeling of discomfort and suppressed irritation prevailing. Miss Paxton could not reckon forbearance among her virtues; she had very little patience with her nieces' foibles, and expressed herself in no measured terms as to the helplessness of both the girls. Moreover, she had never been accustomed to illness, and could not understand her sister's capricious fancies about her food. She prided herself on her cooking, and was disposed to take offence when the mutton-chop, the pudding, or the nice rasher of bacon, were sent

down scarcely tasted; and she complained to the doctor that her sister was full of fancies—she could not touch this, and that made her sick, and she cried out at every noise in the house. 'She didn't know what to do to please her, or how to tempt her to eat,' she said; 'and her spirits are so low that the least word oversets her. I did but tell that fine lady Fanny that I thought she had better be doing something useful, instead of sitting up with her crochet-needle all day, there were plenty of stockings to darn; and she said, with a toss of her head, that her fingers were not used to such work, and marched out of the room; and her mother burst out crying, and sighed over her poor girl, and I had much ado to pacify her. I was obliged to call in John at last; he is his mother's best nurse, I believe.'

'This will never do,' thought Dr. Fisher, as he went down-stairs; 'this woman is very well-meaning, but she is no more fit to nurse a nervous patient than my errand-boy. That poor Mrs. Fletcher will be fretted into her grave if this goes on.'—'Ah! Mr. Wilmot, you are just the person I wanted to see,' he exclaimed, as he opened the door and encountered the clergyman coming up the steps.

'I came to inquire for your patient, Doctor. *How is she?* and would a visit from me do

her good or harm?' asked he, as the doctor put his arm within his, and walked him away.

Dr. Fisher soon made him acquainted with the state of affairs, and consulted him as to the possibility of introducing a better nurse into Mrs. Fletcher's sick room, without affronting her sister, or annoying the family.

'Do you know on what terms the Fletchers and Bentons are, Mr. Wilmot?' he asked. 'Benton's daughter is the very person I should choose to take care of Mrs. Fletcher; d'ye think we could manage to smuggle her into her room?'

Mr. Wilmot smiled and shook his head. 'I wish we could,' he said; 'but I don't see how to manage it. Mary would go, I am sure, and prove the best nurse in the world for a nervous person; but unfortunately Mrs. Fletcher has a weakness for grandeur and display, and looks down upon her quiet neighbours, and she has always kept her daughters aloof from them, so I am afraid she would never consent to admit her. However, I will suggest it to Fletcher, and see what I can do; if Benton can spare his daughter I will try and bring it about. Perhaps Mrs. Wilmot can manage it; I have great faith in her powers of persuasion, and perhaps she can introduce her to Miss Paxton, and say she would be glad to be of use to her.'

'Exactly so; put the matter into Mrs. Wilmot's hands, and I have no doubt it will be done. Good morning;' and the doctor hurried away on his round of visits.

An accident that happened to Miss Paxton a few days after this, spared the conspirators much plotting to secure their object. Mary Benton, who had been constant in her inquiries after Mrs. Fletcher since her illness began, heard that her sister had had a fall in crossing the yard, where some slops had been spilt which had frozen during the night, and had sprained her foot; and with her father's consent, she went immediately to offer her services in any way that they could be useful, whilst Miss Paxton was disabled. Isabella welcomed her gladly; and taking her to her aunt, mentioned her wish to be of use, and asked if she thought she might venture to take her to her mother's room.

'Perhaps,' said Mary timidly, 'Mrs. Fletcher may not like to see one who is almost a stranger. Is not there anything I can do in the kitchen, while you sit with her? Miss Paxton can't move about, I am sure. Will you let me attend to the dinner—or cook some little dish for Mrs. Fletcher? I am well used to make little dainties for my father; he is often ill, and his appetite is very capricious. Will you employ me as *cook, Miss* Paxton, under your direction?'

and she smiled so pleasantly, and seemed so good-humoured and obliging, tucked up her sleeves, tied an apron over her neat dress, and set about her work so handily, that Aunt Susan's grim mood, in no wise improved by the pain of her accident and her crippled condition, was fairly mollified, and she consented to rest her injured foot, and to delegate her active duties to Mary, and to content herself with superintending her operations. She soon found, however, that the bookseller's daughter had a better knowledge of cookery than herself; and the little delicate cutlet which she prepared for the invalid's dinner, looked far more tempting than anything she had been able to send up to her; and when Martha carried up the tray to Mrs. Fletcher's room, after Miss Benton had arranged the cloth neatly upon it, and put everything she was likely to want ready for her, she could not help saying, with a broad smile, as she put it upon the bed, 'Here, Ma'am, here's something you must enjoy, I am sure; it looks as nice and as tempting, as a body may say, as the greatest lady in the land could wish to have put before her.'

'We have a new cook to-day, dear Mamma,' said Isabella, coming forward to arrange her mother's pillows comfortably; 'now you must do justice to her talents,

and eat your dinner, before I tell you anything about it.'

'It does look very nice, I must say,' said Mrs. Fletcher; 'I think I really can eat that.'

'Of course you can,' said her husband, coming into the room; and I am come to sit with you while Bella goes to dinner.'

'What's this about a new cook?' asked Mrs. Fletcher languidly; and how are you getting on down-stairs? it must be in a sad muddle, I'm afraid. Susan is not fit to walk about; and here I lie like a piece of useless lumber—no good to anyone, and a trouble to everybody:' and her feeble spirits gave way to a fit of weeping.

Her husband did his best to soothe her: and presently John came in, and asked if she felt equal to a visit from Mr. Wilmot; and she was cheered and pleased by his kind inquiries, and able to attend to the few comforting verses, and the short prayer, all he ventured upon in her feeble condition.

Then he told her, with a friendly smile, that he had been guilty of a piece of impertinence, and had engaged a new nurse for her, with Dr. Fisher's approbation, to take her sister's place whilst she was disabled; adding, that he should take it as a particular *favour* to himself, if she would allow her to *do what she* could for her. Then he sent

Bella to fetch her; and she was established by the invalid's bed-side, with only a feeble remonstrance from Mrs. Fletcher, who could not resist the gentle compassionate tones in which she said, 'You will let me try and be of use to you; Dr. Fisher says I am one of his best nurses; and I shall think it so kind of you to let me wait upon you.'

It is scarcely necessary to say that long before Mrs. Fletcher's tedious illness was at an end, she became so fond of Mary Benton, and learnt so thoroughly to appreciate her, as nurse, companion, and assistant in all ways in which her daughters should have been of use to her, that she was very reluctant to part with her when Aunt Susan's recovery made her services no longer indispensable, and Mary prepared to return to her father's house. Fanny and Bella were equally loth to see her depart; both had profited, Bella greatly, and Fanny as much as could be expected from her more frivolous nature, by Mary's example; and Fanny could not but acknowledge to herself that she was her superior in every respect. George Fletcher looked upon her as a daughter; and John's feelings need scarcely be described.

When she took leave of Mrs. Fletcher, she warmly thanked her, and pressed her to come every day to see her; and the

intimacy between the two families resulted, as my readers will have foreseen, in Mary's becoming in the course of time the wife of her only son, and being thoroughly appreciated and beloved by both father and mother.

Mr. Wilmot performed the marriage ceremony with the greatest satisfaction; and at the wedding breakfast, he and Dr. Fisher both declared that John owed his wife to their good offices, and claimed the credit of having brought about the marriage by introducing the bride into his mother's sick room. John smilingly expressed his gratitude to both his kind friends, but protested that Aunt Susan had the first claim to it, as her fall had brought Mary actually upon the scene; and all 'went merry as the marriage bells.'

John and his wife were admirably suited to each other, and led happy and useful lives, thoroughly respected by their neighbours of all classes.

Mrs. Fletcher's illness, and the failure of her plans for her children's happiness, led her in the end to much higher and truer views of life, and its aims and duties, than she had previously entertained. Mr. Wilmot's visits during her long confinement to her room had had much influence upon her, and she was no longer guided in her

judgments of people and things, by their appearance in the eyes of the world of fashion, which had once been all-powerful with her; she recognized goodness in whatever garb it was clad—sanctioned her daughter Isabella's marriage to a steady young man who was much attached to her, unmindful of the fact of his having been her husband's shopman; and did her best to counteract the evils of Fanny's early training: and the expression 'It looks so!' which had once been so continually on her lips, ceased to be heard as a familiar household phrase.

GOSSIP.

GOSSIP.

Old Mrs. Langfield's cottage was quite a picture of neatness and comfort. She had been housekeeper for many years at the Park at Oakleigh, and when she retired from service, her master fitted up the south lodge with everything she could need to make it comfortable and home-like for her; and here she hoped to end her days, among those who thoroughly loved and respected her. She had adopted an orphan grandchild when she took up her abode here, and on her she bestowed all the affection and careful training, which her own children had received from her in earlier days. Mary Langfield went to a good middle-class school at a neighbouring town, and was often allowed to invite some of her school friends to spend the day or drink tea with her.

One evening, during the Christmas holidays, Mrs. Langfield gave a little party; and the girls were all very happy, sitting round the fire, talking and playing at various

Christmas games, guessing riddles, and so on, while their hostess was preparing supper for them.

'Why, Susan, my dear,' she exclaimed, as she came into the room after completing her preparations, 'you are chattering like a little magpie.'

'Susan is telling us of the droll things ladies tell her mother when they go to fit on their dresses, Mrs. Langfield,' said Lucy Johnson.

'Does your mother like you to repeat these out of her house, Susan?'

Susan coloured, for there was something in Mrs. Langfield's tone which made her feel as if she had been doing wrong. 'I don't know, Ma'am,' she said, hesitating; 'mother did not know I heard what the ladies said, I think; she did not say I was not to repeat it.'

'Is there any harm in Susan's telling us *exactly* what she heard?' asked Annie Davis. 'Of course if she altered the words it would be wrong, but if not—'

'Susan cannot be quite sure, I imagine, that she does always repeat what she hears quite exactly; but even if she did, it does not seem to me fair upon her mother's customers, to publish their talk. They know Mrs. Bennett to be very trustworthy, and they might speak freely before her, knowing that

their words would not be repeated by her; perhaps they did not notice Susan's presence, or know she was attending to what passed.'

'So we must not hear any more of Susan's funny stories,' said Bessie Lewis, sighing.

Mrs. Langfield laughed; and Annie said, 'Well, I don't think they could be exactly called funny; some of the things the ladies said sounded ill-natured.'

'Oh! you mean about Mr. Jones grudging his wife money to pay for her dresses,' said Mary.

'And how shamefully the laundress spoilt Mrs. James's new spotted muslin,' said Lucy.

'If that is the talk you are repeating, Susan,' said Mrs. Langfield gravely, 'I must say it is neither right nor kind to spread such tales, and I am sorry to think that they could please any of you.'

The girls looked abashed, and Mrs. Langfield asked if they should like to hear such tales about their father or mother. All said 'No' eagerly; and Annie said, 'They would not be *true*, father never grudged mother anything, I'm sure.'

'And I don't think anyone would believe such a thing of Mr. Davis, if it were said,' exclaimed Lucy; 'everyone in the town knows how free he is with his money.'

'I do not doubt it,' said Mrs. Langfield; 'but I will venture to say that if such a tale

were got up about him, *somebody* would believe it, and take pleasure in repeating it.'

'Oh, impossible!' cried Annie.

'Not at all. You girls are all ready to believe what Susan says she heard of Mr. Jones; and judging from your bright looks when I came into the room, I should say that none of you felt any pain about his stinginess, or the disaster to the spotted muslin; or would hesitate to say what you had heard, and to spread abroad the ideas you have in your heads, about your neighbours' failings in generosity and in carefulness.'

'You think we are not doing as we would be done by,' said Annie thoughtfully.

'Ask yourselves if it is not so; and I must tell you all that the story about Mr. Jones is quite untrue. I happen to know his wife very well, and I have heard a great deal about him. His brother died a bankrupt some years ago, leaving three little children in great distress; and nothing can equal Mr. Jones's kindness and liberality to these little orphans. He has paid for their education, and is placing them each in a good situation, where they will be able to earn their livelihood. Neither he nor his wife can afford to be extravagant in their expenditure, but I am quite sure that he has never denied her

money to purchase necessary clothing; and that she would never wish him to give her any expensive dress which he could not afford.'

'What a shame it is to say such things of him then!' cried Susan.

'A great shame, if it were purposely said,' said Mrs. Langfield; 'but as it happens, I think I can guess how the tale arose, for I met Mrs. Jones with a cousin of hers in Wilton's shop last week, and the cousin was trying to persuade her to buy a costly satin dress, which she said was much too expensive for her; and while they were looking at it, Mr. Jones came into the shop, and said laughingly to his wife, "Don't run me up a tremendous bill, Bessie; Lucy here looks on mischief intent, don't let her persuade you to ruin me outright:" and the cousin laughed and said, "Not I, I know it's of no use, with such a crabbed old husband to keep her in order. Aren't you ashamed to be so stingy, and to grudge your wife the very gown on her back?" and they went away laughing at the joke. There was a new apprentice in the shop, a brother of Mrs. Downes's maid, and I dare say he repeated it to his sister, who perhaps told her mistress.'

Susan laughed. 'You are a conjuror, Mrs. Langfield; it *was* Mrs. Downes who said it to Mrs. Hobson.'

'And if it had not chanced that I should hear what took place in Wilton's shop, you would all have believed most unjust things of kind Mr. Jones.'

Susan looked ashamed, and said, 'I am very sorry, Mrs. Langfield; I hope I shall remember this, and not repeat tales again.'.

'Yes; and when you hear ill of your neighbours, don't be in such a hurry to believe it: the golden rule of doing to others as we would they should do to us, should guide you in this. You would not like others to believe ill of you, or of those dear to you; do not believe what you hear said against others, unless it is something proved beyond doubt.'

'And then?'

'Be grieved for them, and hope that they have some excuse for their conduct which you do not know. Surely the love that "thinketh no evil" should lead all Christians to do this.'

After a pause, Bessie said, 'Perhaps, Mrs. Langfield, you can contradict the tale about the laundress that spoilt Mrs. James's muslin dress too?'

'No, I cannot contradict it, but I can imagine an excuse for it, for I know that poor Widow Dixon has two children ill of *the measles*, and that she was obliged to *employ* an ignorant woman to fill her place

at the ironing table last week, whilst she was nursing them; so I can guess that the disaster may have occurred through no fault of hers, and may deserve pity instead of blame.'

'If so, it would be very hard upon her to repeat it,' said Annie, 'and might do her mischief.'

'Yes; if the tale were spread abroad of the dress being spoilt, ladies might be afraid of sending theirs to her, and she would lose employment perhaps for many weeks or months, from the unfortunate circumstance of having had an ignorant assistant on one occasion, which may never happen again.'

'I see,' said Lucy; 'I never thought of the harm such talk might do. Isn't it a pity that the ladies should have talked so in Mrs. Bennet's room?'

'A great pity. I suppose they did not guess that their careless words would be repeated; I dare say they forgot them as soon as they were spoken. But we have nothing to do with them; we can take care that no mischief comes from our talk; and that is all that concerns us. And that is a weighty matter; I can never be thankful enough that my dear mother early taught me to shun gossip and idle tale-bearing. If you knew the harm I have seen done by the careless words of an idle boy—'

'Oh, do tell us!' they all exclaimed; 'do tell us, Mrs. Langfield; we do enjoy one of your tales of your childish days. See, it wants half an hour to tea-time, let us hear the story—may we?'

'Make up the fire, then, and put the kettle on the hob; and I'll tell you a tale my mother told to me, when she thought I was disposed to gossip about my neighbours.

'In the town in which we lived when I was a child, there was a chemist's shop, in which an assistant and an apprentice were regularly employed to wait upon customers, and measure and weigh medicines. The master was a very careful high-principled man, and very much respected by all his neighbours; and many of the poor people went to him instead of to a doctor, to tell their ailments, and ask for suitable medicines.

'A very nice steady boy was taken by him as an apprentice; he came from a village twenty miles off, where he had been his mother's chief blessing and comfort in her widowhood; and during a long illness he had nursed her, and tended his little brothers and sisters, more like a careful old woman than a sprightly lad. She could not afford to keep him at home; and the gentleman *with whom* she had formerly lived as nurse

to his children, paid for Ned's apprenticeship to the chemist; and Mr. Ludlow was very glad to take so good a boy into his shop, and soon found that he could trust him with his drugs, and his weights and measures, as entirely as he could his assistant who had been with him for many years. Every drug was carefully weighed out, and every medicine that could be harmful if taken by mistake, distinctly labeled; and Mr. Ludlow delighted the widow's heart, when she came in the carrier's cart to see her son at Christmas, by his praise of his steadiness and trustworthiness. A toilsome journey the poor woman had that cold winter's day; but she returned to her poor cottage, and her fatherless little ones, with a heart full of thankfulness to God, who had given her so good a son, to be, as she fondly hoped, a blessing and a support to her in her old age.

'You may guess her feelings, therefore, when one evening, about a fortnight after this, as she was putting her children to bed, a neighbour tapped at the door, and on being desired to come in, presented herself with a very long face; and after many sighs and groans and shakes of the head, and "Ah! this is a weary world we live in!" "Troubles never come single, they say," and so on, went on, "Ah Dame, ye have not heard the news, I suppose? you stay so

close at home, news don't come here easy; still 'tis strange such news as this, what's all over the village, hasn't reached you, that it concerns so much."

'"Well, Neighbour, you see, I'm not much for news; I don't trouble my head much about other people's business, I have enough to do to think of my children, and how to feed and clothe them."

'"Your children, ay—and that fine lad at Ludlow's, isn't he a son of yours?"

'"Yes, that he is, thank God for it; a better lad never breathed."

'"Ah well, it's well you think so, but you don't know, poor soul!"

'"Don't know what? what are you talking about? is it anything about my Ned?"

'"Well, they do say as how he has done for himself, and his master too—Ludlow 'll never hold up his head again."

'The poor woman gasped for breath. "Speak out, Neighbour, speak out; what is it my boy has done?"

'"Why, then, he's nearly poisoned a young woman!"

'"Poisoned—a young woman—what can you mean?"

'"By mistake, you know—gived her the wrong medicine, or too much of it, I don't rightly know which—but they say Ludlow 'll *be ruined*, and Ned had better run for it, or

he'll be took up, sure*ly*. But what's the matter, Dame? don't ye take on so.—Oh! she's dying!—Jane, Jane, run and call neighbour Watson, tell her to come directly, your mother's dying!"

'Off started the frightened child; and the woman tried in vain to undo the mischief she had done. The shock had been too much for the poor mother, and it was long before she could be restored to her senses, and then her grief and anxiety were sad to witness.

'Ill as she was, nothing could stop her from starting with the morning's light for Stockton, to "find out the rights of the tale, and see what she could do for her poor boy." The carrier would not be going to town till Saturday, and that was Tuesday; she could not wait, she must walk the whole way: and walk she did, and reached Ludlow's shop almost dead with cold and fatigue, terrifying Ned by stumbling across the threshold, and falling upon the floor almost at his feet. Ned called his master, who used proper means to restore her; and after a time she recovered enough to explain her errand, and to account for the condition in which she was. Ned exclaimed in surprise and indignation when he heard what had brought her to Stockton; and his master was no less angered, and declared he would send

a constable, to frighten the gossiping neighbour, and threaten to take her up for slander.'

'Was the tale all false, then?' asked Annie.

'The facts were these. One of Mr. Ludlow's old customers was a lady who had suffered for many years from a painful and incurable disorder, and her doctor ordered her sleeping draughts in which a few drops of laudanum were put, when the pain was very great. One of her servants, a careless young housemaid, had a severe fit of toothache, and finding all simple remedies fail, she bethought herself of her mistress's sleeping draughts, and instead of asking her to give her something for her pain, she helped herself to a few drops of laudanum, and in her ignorance took an overdose, and frightened all the family by her drowsiness. They were obliged to keep her walking about for some hours till the effect of the laudanum was worn off, and of course her mistress was very much alarmed, and very angry with the girl for her folly, and for taking the medicine without leave.'

'But nobody was to blame but herself,' cried Bessie.

'Nobody, except that the bottle of laudanum should not have been left within the reach of any such careless girls as there were in Mrs. Abden's household.'

'Then how came the tale to spring up about Ned? Why, he had nothing to do with it, surely?'

'Nothing whatever; the laudanum had been supplied by Mr. Ludlow some weeks before, by the doctor's order. The tale was spread by an idle gossiping baker's boy, who was waiting at the door for orders, when the servants were talking over their alarm the night before, and how they "thought Lucy would never have been roused;" and how "Mistress said she ought never to have touched the bottle;" and how "it was dangerous to leave such things about;" and "Poisons like that didn't ought to be sold;" and "Where was it bought, I wonder;" "Oh! at Ludlow's, of course;" "I shouldn't wonder, now, if it wasn't Widow Hickson's boy as put it up;" "Boys like that ought not to be trusted with drugs;" and so the talk ran, and the baker's boy took it all in, and spread the news from door to door wherever he went that morning. Before night the wildest rumours were afloat; and Mr. Ludlow's shop was crowded with customers next day, all inquiring about an affair of which he and his assistants were entirely ignorant. In vain he declared that he knew nothing, had heard nothing, of any mistake about medicine at Mrs. Abden's. "'Twas a blind," his disappointed neighbours said, "but they were not

so easily blinded, not they; they were sure Ludlow and his boy had some hands in it, and they'd find it out before long;" and off they went, telling those whom they met on the same errand of news-hunting, that it was of no use going to the shop, but "things would come out before many days were over, no doubt." And so the tale spread, and grew as it went, till it reached poor Widow Hickson's village, and gave her a shock from which she never recovered.'

'Oh! how sad! how very shocking!' exclaimed the girls; 'did the tale really kill her?'

'It was the cause of her death in the end; she had a heart complaint, which would be aggravated by any great agitation, or by exposure to cold; and the shock of hearing such news, and the excitement and exertion of her walk to Stockton on a bitterly cold snowy day in January, brought on an attack of illness from which she never recovered.'

'And what became of Ned?'

'It was a hard struggle with the poor boy before he could bring himself to forgive the gossips who had brought such sorrow upon him; and although Mr. Ludlow and the gentleman who had apprenticed him to him, took great pains to have the tale contradicted, and to hunt up the facts of the case, and make them public, there were always some

ill-natured folk who shook their heads and said, "Well, 'tis contradicted, certainly; *but*" . . . . and that "but" was enough to bring cold looks and suspicious surmises upon the poor lad; so that when his apprenticeship was at an end, he refused to remai as Mr. Ludlow's assistant, and went to distant town, where I believe he final settled.

'But now, girls, I really must leave c talking. Mary dear, run and help Nanc to bring in the supper; it is getting late, an I must send you home in good time.'

FINIS.

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